杉原智則
イラスト●3
烙印の紋章 Ⅱ
陰謀の都を竜は駆ける
電撃文庫

烙印の紋章 Ⅱ

陰謀の都を竜は駆ける

杉原智則

イラスト●3

「伝えてみよう、自分の言葉で。
なるほど、確かに自分から近づいていかねば、誰のこともわからぬ」

ビリーナ国第三王女

ビリーナ・アウエル

「ジジイどもの顔と名前を覚えるのはもううんざりだ。
それより軍用書を持ってきてくれ。
最近の戦いの記録が添えられてある奴がいい」

剣闘士から皇太子へ

オルバ

元帝国評議会議員

ザット・クォーク

メフィウス皇帝

グール・メフィウス

「メフィウスの犬め、おれと当たるまで負けるなよ。
おれがこの手で打ち砕いてやる」

剣闘士

“豪腕”パーシル

「イネーリのお願い、聞いていただけないかしら」

皇太子の義妹

イネーリ・メフィウス

デザイン●カマベヨシヒコ

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Chapter 1 - Endless Battle

Part 1

Upon finding that Kaiser had been imprisoned, Fedom Aulin jumped up. Kaiser Islan was a noble who once served as a member of the Imperial council.

One week earlier. In a morning council, Mephius' emperor, Guhl Mephius, proposed the relocation of the Dragon God shrine accompanied by a large-scale reconstruction. The shrine, built 200 years ago to worship the Dragon God, would be placed in the basement under the imperial capital Solon's renowned Black Tower. It would be moved towards to the vicinity of the palace, and made into a marvellous structure.

Of the sudden comments, some of the nobles graciously offered flattery, but Kaiser alone had directly expressed his feelings of opposition. The amount of gold and people required made it far from precedent. Now was the time to fix the relations between Mephius, Garbera, and Ende, though of course, the circumstances weren't ones that provided for the highest of prospects. To start with, in the festivals dedicated to the Dragon God that were already held several times a year, practically none of the people even showed up; in other words it had become a thing of the past.

"There should be more critical issues at hand. Forgive my insolence, but please reconsider."

"Is that so," was all the emperor said. And then the talk was over.

Kaiser was well into his mid-fifties, and held a long standing relation with the current emperor. Like that, no one paid the squabble another thought.

But, five days later, Kaiser, through an open evening party held at his residence, newly reproached the king's political measures. "Recently, his majesty passes over whatever he says without warning," he drunkenly grieved to the close friends he had invited over.

Normally, this would not have warranted any special course of action, but this time the emperor entered into a fit of rage for some unknown reason and declared, "Those are the thoughts of a rebel!" All of a sudden, troops surrounded Kaiser's residence, and they arrested him. "I'm acting without notice"[1]—and, Kaiser's own actions had unexpectedly become evidence against him.

Unease soon spread within Solon as doubts were raised, questioning whether his majesty planned to execute Kaiser. Three days and nights passed. Kaiser was placed

[1] The king's retort, imitating the statement Kaiser blurted out that led to his arrest

underground, in a prison unfit for a noble, and forbidden even a single meeting with his family.

Fedom had jumped, in response to being struck by a seeming mixture of shock and dread—because he had also personally voiced his opinion to the king having seen an opportunity to hasten peace negotiations with Garbera—and there was something else; something completely different. His chest filled with a feeling of delight bordering excitement.

It might be my turn at last.

Emperor Guhl Mephius would once more put his plan of strengthening his own authority into action, and in the process earn the hostility of his surroundings. That was when Fedom would put his own plan into practice, and the testimony of that day drew near. The foundation of a new political power, one in support of Prince Gil, would be formed within the empire.

It was a large ambition. Were the feelings within him the same that Kaiser held? No, it was a fact that he held stern eyes from this point on that made it impossible to detect even a glimmer of his emotions. And it was only this that prompted him to call out.

"Lord Fedom."

Down the Main Palace's hallway, as Zaat Quark greeted him, Fedom thought to himself, *I met a troublesome fellow.*

"Have you heard of Lord Kaiser's circumstances?"

"Immediately so."

"Just what is his majesty planning? This has gone too far for a joke! You must tell me your thoughts. I will take it with me to my grave."

Zaat was relentless, and Fedom evasively answered befittingly. Zaat Quark was head of the so-called anti-imperial faction. Of course, it wasn't as if he walked around with a sign hanging on him stating who he was. Like Fedom, he followed a similar train of thought, and in remonstration before the emperor who was so insistent on fighting to the bitter end, helped in convincing him to promote peace negotiations. He also held a position as a member of the Founding Imperial Council, and it was clearly evident that he in no way harboured positive sentiments towards the emperor who had reduced the Imperial Council to one in name only.

In this sense, Zaat considered Fedom as a comrade. Or at least, he *should* have.

"There has not been too many aggravated situations, but there is bound to be a backlash. For this reason, we are to spread idle chatter of his intentions with this 'joke', which will instead become truth. This is a secretive matter. You know fully well of the king's temperament."

"How are you so calm? This is treason against the emperor! And did you know? Just the other day, the king met with a messenger from Ende and—"

"Pardon me. I have some matters to attend to."

"Lord Fedom," Zaat knitted his deep black eyebrows, "This isn't like you. Worrying over the country's future in earnest to this extent, you're even prepared to face his majesty's judgment! Surely, the affair regarding Lord Kaiser hasn't left you losing your wits."

"Mind your words, milord." Fedom fixed a sharp glare at Zaat. Age-wise, Fedom was 10 years older.

"How rude of me. But lately, you've been acting strange." *Strange*, probably referred to how he was recently sticking to Prince Gil Mephius all the time. Leaving the still insistent Zaat, Fedom hurried along. For Fedom who should have been on the very same anti-imperial faction, there was no other way but for him to seemingly change his allegiance."

That damned Zaat, curses! Making a face as if he knows everything. He plans to test me, eh?

To start with, Fedom never held any good will towards Zaat. There were plenty of competent intellectuals around, but for Fedom's knowledge alone, many a powerful men had clearly come to him for favours. In the case of the peace talks, after unfastening a historical document, "That country's precedent was so and so", "According to former traditions, this and that should be done," he one by one brought out old information that left the others rather dumbfounded.

To be treated as a coward of all things!

Far from it, Fedom had crossed a far more dangerous line in voicing his concerns to the emperor than Zaat ever had. In terms of risks alone, his plan was immeasurably more dangerous. And this plan was finally about to enter the stage where it could be implemented. He was dazzled by the thought.

"What's wrong?" Orba asked, staring at Fedom as he gave off a creepy expression.

"You suddenly went quiet, and your complexion turned blue, then red. You seem *very* sick."

"Shut your mouth!" Fedom cursed in embarrassment. They were in the prince's room within the Main Palace. Just in case, he had pretended to bring along a get-well present, though Fedom continued to behaved rudely regardless.

"That aside, what's with you? I drop by this once to find you haven't made a speck of progress! You don't have all the time in the world. Dinn, how do you explain this sorry state?!"

Precisely because the final time drew nearer, he could not be impatient with Prince Gil's *education* to guarantee success. He aimed the brunt of his frustrations towards Dinn, the page in charge of this education.

"I can't believe this," Gil Mephius grumbled.

Fedom left immediately after he had finished speaking his mind. Gil gave a big yawn, having read through all of the Mephian history books spread out on the table without rest until a short while ago.

"It's as if I was a new sword-slave about to enter the fray in the arena for the first time all over again. Though those guys generally don't get a chance to appear a second time."

"In any case, Fedom-sama was right to scold you," Dinn said as he removed the tea leaves from the newly brewed tea. "If you would only try harder. Then you could take on the prince's appearance in public without putting him to shame, and yet, at this rate two, three, even ten years wouldn't be enough."

"Table manners, the study of Mephian culture, memorizing the names of successive generations of emperors and their accomplishments by heart, and spending one hour a day standing in front of a mirror correcting my posture and smile; these are things I might not use my whole life. What's the point in continuing this?"

"All of it is necessary."

"I'm fed up with learning the faces and names of those old geezers. Anyway, bring the military documents over. You can place them next to those records of recent battles."

He laid down on the couch, whilst pretending not to hear Dinn's reproaches. Just now, Fedom seemed to be irritated for some reason, but for Gil—the gladiator Orba, also formerly known as the Iron Tiger—his pent up emotions were no smaller in size than Fedom's.

He had been picked up by Fedom to act as a body double, but Orba never had any intention of doing only as he was told since the beginning. Even if he had to make use of this position, he would accomplish his goal:

To get revenge on the people that took everything from him. And to search for all the things he had lost.

He had finally reached the point where, with his own hands, he could bring himself closer to the many goals he held that couldn't be granted with the status of sword-slave. But the situation had reached a stand-still.

"Today, another twenty meeting requests had to be turned down. It is Rodloom-sama's fifth time by request of Ineli-sama and for Baton-sama—if you remember his name, he is one of the prince's best friends—he has come twice. One month of valuable time has already passed since your first campaign, and it will only seem more and more unusual."

For this one month, Fedom had confined Orba within the prince's room. Under the pretext that the mental strain from his first campaign and sudden change in environment over the several days had caused his physical condition to crumble, he was not allowed to participate in official business and was prohibited from personally meeting with the large number of people who sought to get closer to him. During this time, he devoted himself to Orba's education in making him more prince-like, no matter how little, as part of his plan.

Naturally, within that month, Orba built up his knowledge, and mastered manners. He was forced to endlessly repeat these activities. Unable to search for his mother, brother, and Alice's whereabouts, he spent his time on meaningless extravagance that only served to test his patience to its limits.

"Because Fedom-sama is not aware of the current situation here, he's convinced that he settled everything with the words "Refuse the meetings," but he really needs to put himself in the shoes of the one refusing. Everyone had finally started to see the prince in a new light after his first campaign, and now this happens," Dinn grumbled his complaints, but suddenly faltered.

"Are you a *fool*?" Orba interrupted. "If I'm still struck with horror from my first campaign. they'll wonder what that heroic prince was doing when the battle took place, and then they'll find he didn't abide by the decree to go into battle, only to be shaking in his boots."

"W-Would you like to go for a stroll?"

"That was something I just thought up. Isn't it fine? The former prince was this kind of person. This would clear us of suspicions instead."

The problem is,

While joking around, Orba thought of another matter. When Fedom had come just moments ago, there was something he couldn't bring himself to ask.

of the two, which is the real 'fool'

A body double would normally only act the role during essential times. There should be no need to set up a double, especially when the palace situation was normal. Fedom had subsequently claimed it was because there was a risk of assassination even in the capital city of Solon, which should have been a sufficient explanation, but Orba obviously didn't buy it.

And also,

When the battle at Zaim Fortress had ended, Fedom accidentally let slip that no one else knew of the fact the prince had been substituted for a body double. On that account, Fedom might be the only one involved in this plan he set up. If that were to be true, even Orba—who was beside death's door during his two years as a sword-slave—couldn't possibly have shaken off that overwhelmingly chilling sensation..

No one else knowing would imply that Fedom was deceiving all of the Mephians, himself excluded. Orba also, under no condition, could allow himself to rest. This was a matter his life hanged on.

"Mephius' founding festival is approaching. It is a festival that gathers the whole country together. If you do not make an appearance here, things will take a bad turn. Just how long will Fedom-sama..."

At that moment, the bell was rung. Dinn responded by leaving. Beyond the door, a voice could be heard from a small room facing the corridor. It sounded like Ineli. Immediately after Emperor Guhl had lost his wife, he married a second wife and her daughter, Ineli, had become Gil's younger stepsister.

Once the heated discussion ended, Dinn returned. He gave off a face of total exhaustion.

"That person ranks as the most difficult."

"What happened?"

"The usual 'Let's go hang out' invitation from your close friends and 'Instead of being holed up in that room with that of weak body his, he needs some recreational activity' remark."

"I see," Orba said, somewhat occupied with other thoughts. "Back then, what did Gowen say to you?"

"Eh? Oh, he asked whether we could go together to General Saian's residence after receiving his invitation."

"Then let's head over to where Ineli and the group is. I'll take care of these two engagements in one go. Pass the message to her for me."

"But Fedom-sama said..."

"It's better if I learn some faces up close . Lets go with this ruse: the prince is left with a nasty temper due to his bad shape. No one will think much of it if he acts a little differently, especially if it's within his own home. If it's just for a bit, it'll work."

Orba by no means had any intentions of becoming the same as the flustered Dinn. He refused to take no action. No matter how big, essentially, this one room was no different from a prison, and felt himself crushed with impatience and insecurities as he passed days on end.

This also counts as a battle. Completely becoming the prince will bring me one step closer in searching for Alice and my family, he murmured to persuade himself.

And within Solon was one other person unable to dispel her growing irritation.

"How about this dress? How does it compare to the previous white and vivid one? Aah, but I wonder if the second dress might be better since it is a Mephian one. But then the tiara I brought from my own country won't match. I'll have to ask the maids here, and show my appreciation later."

"Uh huh."

In a room lying deep within the women's chamber, compared to the briskly bustling Theresia, Vileena offered not even the slightest of movements. As a guest from Garbera, the fourteen year-old princess played around with the dresses and tried on multiple ornaments. Upon witnessing this sight, even the enemies of her parents would scowl at their own reflected appearance.

"Honestly, if it were the Garberan royal court, it wouldn't matter how famous the designer was. On sending out an official notice that a princess was in need of new provisions, a pile of dresses would appear in her room without waiting a week. To go out and playfully trample over them was what it meant to be a princess."

"Right."

"Solon, being far from any sea trading base, has very little high quality cloth. Even though it's my first set of tailored clothes, if I had known three months ago that an advance order was necessary, I would have taken measures before the wedding."

"Is that so."

"If you were to become any more skilful at being dependent on others, you might not have a chance to get any closer to the empress, that is, your stepmother. You are fussing over a dress and tiara. To become a bride is to enter your partner's family. To become a harmonious couple, such endeavours are needed. ....Aah, but if I remember correctly, the current empress is the second wife. Because the prince is not her own son, she may not care much for his wife."

Yes, and Vileena's form once more stood across the mirror. Theresia glared at her, and before long decided to take a *deep* breath.

"Vileena-sama!!"

"Eek!"

With a startled jump, Vileena instantly came to a halt. "Shouting in a person's ear like that..."

"If I hadn't used this volume of voice, then the current princess would not have heard me," Theresia puffed up her chest. "The princess is choosing clothes to wear at the founding festival as if it is someone else's problem. Generally, when women pick their dress and any earrrings or bracelets that might match it even a little, they fidget around restlessly, unable to calm themselves down. Anticipating for their fated partner, or possibly realizing their insecurities, they indulge in their own worries while also having fun."

"On that matter, I have complete faith in you. If it is of your opinion."

"Oh my, I am humbly delighted to receive such a generous praise...and? What are you really thinking? Will you share with me? Are you thinking about how you haven't rode in an air carrier recently, or how you want to fly in the sky? Or if it's not riding that you want to do, then how you could maybe pass time doing maintenance,

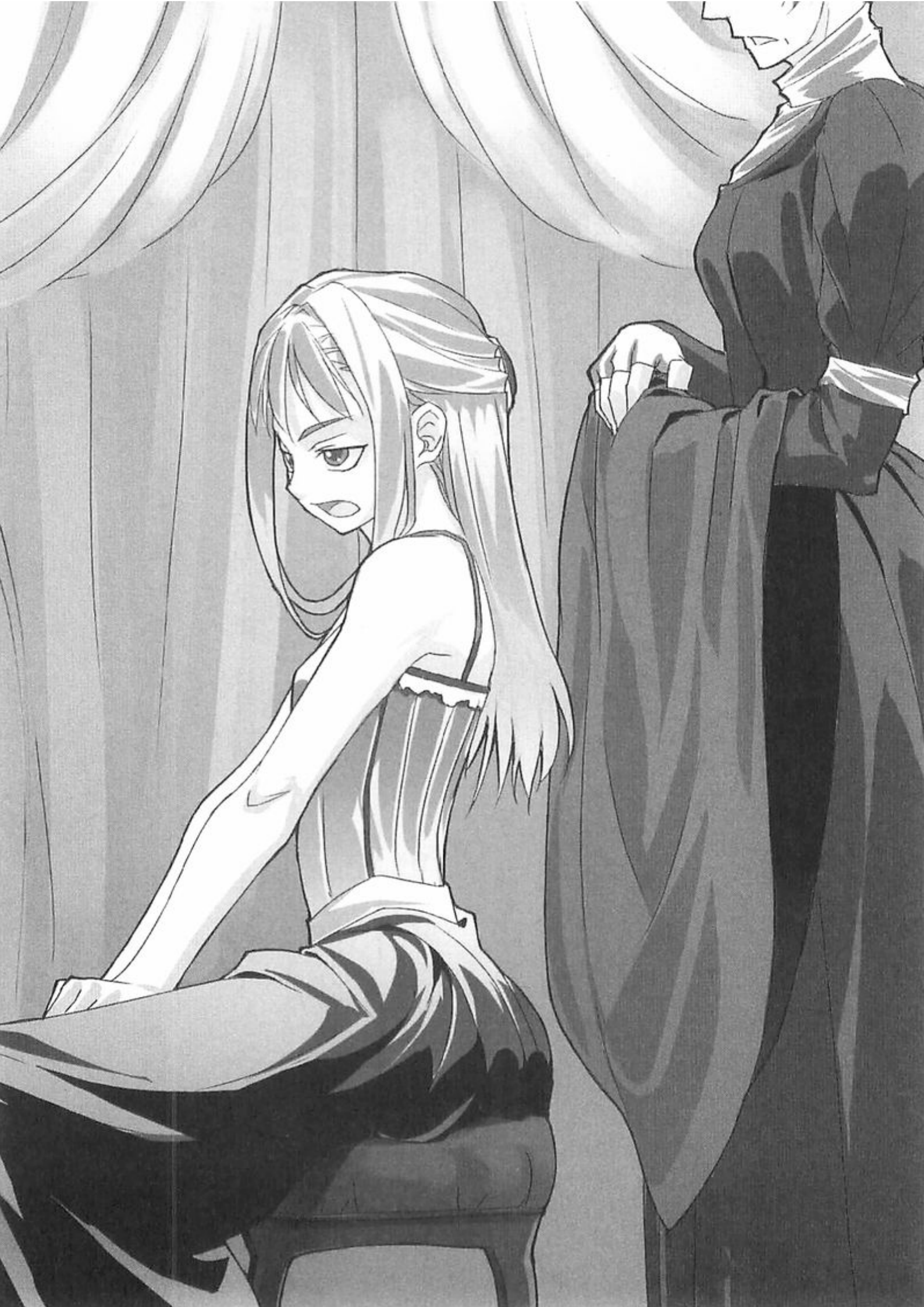
or how you miss the smell of oil. Ah! It must be about why the prince hasn't come to visit you."

"That last one was completely uncalled for!"

Vileena scowled, but could not conceal the smile on her mouth. Theresia had always been a formidable foe. In a straight battle of wits, she would immediately get caught in her pace. And then with a shrug,

"Well, since his return from his first campaign, he's shut himself in his room the whole time. The frail prince is somewhat like a princess."

"It has already been a month since, and he hasn't allowed anyone to see his face. For a maiden in love, it is a rather long time..."



"Anyhow!" Vileena forcefully interrupted, "I'm not hiding anything. I'm annoyed. How much longer will these awkward times continue? The scheduled day of the wedding has not been the least bit decided, and my range of activities has been restricted the entire time. I'll be frank. This is not the least bit fun!"

"Haaa."

On that assertion, Theresia had no clue on what to do. But she also planned to grasp the princess' words. Whether or not Garbera still held any influence on it, the marriage ceremony had been postponed indefinitely. There were considerably few places Vileena could freely roam, and day after day her growing irritation only worsened.

Originally, even within her Garberan homelands, she was an energetically active princess who would not be found in the same place within the same hour. Spending whole days living her life doing everything within a small portion of the women's chambers was something she completely could not agree with. She would occasionally show up for tea and dinner parties after receiving an invitation from the noblewomen, but would experience nothing but agony as she put on the guise of a smiling face.

"The prince too, appears to have entirely forgotten that his fiancée is here. But during times like these, isn't there also that? He could exchange letters and then pass the message on to the chamberlain, right?"

"It is often used in stories. Secretly accompanying the letter would be a love poem."

"Of course I would be mad if he doesn’t even tell me his intentions. And to add to the problems, there is unrest within Mephius no matter how you look at it. The emperor refuses to offer an explanation for his judgment of Islan, who appears to have been imprisoned. There would be nothing to gain from doing this in Garbera. His retainers, however, neither challenge nor protest against him, only taking sneak peeks at his countenance and taking care not to face his wrath."

It is exactly as she says, Theresia thought in her head. She usually did not make such an understanding statement based on rumours alone, but Theresia had known her for a long time, and kept silent.

"If the retainers cannot give counsel due to fear, then the prince himself should act as an intermediary for the retainers. The emperor may find admonition disagreeable, but if it were Gil, his own son and successor, he should be willing to lend an ear."

"Truly."

"And yet, he has not outstripped his poor physical condition nor been cured of the illness he received from the front. If he cares about his country's future, he should even be crawling on his knees if need be. If it were my grandfather, he would hurl scoldings at him for not having enough guts."

"Speaking of which, you want to have a meeting with the prince, right? If that's the case," Theresia said with a clap, "how should we go about the get-well present?"

"Get-well present?"

As a matter of fact, Theresia had been waiting for the right timing to broach the topic. There was no way Vileena hadn't considered the thought, but it was hard for her to say upfront that she would personally go to see her fiancé, who had neglected her for so long.

"Come now, the princess was going to ensnare the prince right? To get him to fall madly in love with you, a certain degree of preparation will be needed. For this to happen, this Theresia whom you've fully placed your trust on will to the best of her abilities, make you Mephius' most beautiful woman!"

Theresia immediately began selecting clothes that would charm the impotent soon-to-be husband.

Part 2

"What do you think of His Highness Gil?"

"What do you mean?" Ineli tilted her head.

"You already know what I'm talking about," the one speaking said with a pout. He was Baton Cadmus.

"Even now I still can't believe it. For *that* crown prince Gil to achieve merits on his first campaign."

Saddled on their horses on the top of a hill, the youths waiting for Prince Gil neared their twenties and were all sons coming from families of distinguished nobles. Even though this was true, none of them held the right of the eldest son to succeed their family. Baton too, was the third son of the Cadmus House and had already turned 19, but spent everyday roaming about doing nothing.

The boys nodded in unison.

"That's true. Looks like there's quite a few rumours too."

"Rumours?"

"He was sent on his first campaign for the time being to be adorned with merits to appear more suitable as a successor, for one. After he won the battle, Oubary's been complaining how he's had it rough on his side "

"Isn't it a bit late? His Majesty the Emperor has already publicly denounced His Highness as *useless*, you know."

"It's because it's now. The Mephius imperial family has no other appropriate male heir. If you were to be married and get a husband, then that would be a different story."

"Sorry about that," Ineli stuck out her tongue. "Well, the brother I know can't be connected to the one actively participating in the battlefield as I've heard."

"That's why, let's test it out," Baton said with a grin.

"Baton, whenever you get these thoughts nothing good comes out of it."

"It'll be fine. No one's going to get hurt. I just want to see how things play out. Will that prince who bravely took part in the battlefield maintain his composure or not when entangled with your neighbourhood thug."

"I guess," Ineli purposely opened her mouth in the shape of a zero.[2] "Really, you have such a *great* personality, Cadmus-sama!"

"Shh! Here they come."

The guards accompanying Prince Gil Mephius came into view along the hill's ridgeline. Everyone courteously gave their salutations. "Ah," Gil slovenly nodded back. He looked partially pale. It was more than justified for one bedridden and bearing the mental fatigue from the battlefield.

"It has been a while, your Highness. Now then everyone, salute Mephius' new hero" Baton said jokingly, causing everyone laugh. Gil kept a stern expression void of any smiles. The guards were sent back, and Gil got on his horse.

Orba joined with everyone else and they slowly rode off. Not even thirty minutes ago back at the palace, the one who proposed they should go on horseback seemed to have been Ineli. "The weather finally turned nice too. Let's take a slight detour,"

[2] You could also think 本当 in Japanese or the word "whole"

she suggested. There were five other people accompanying her. According to the information Dinn had investigated beforehand, they were all sons of distinguished nobles, and had been acquainted with the prince since young.

For Orba, his first exposure to sunlight in a month felt great. The wind gently brushed across his face, and the fragrance that drifted from the palace flower gardens wasn't too bad either. But he never lowered his guard. While donning a scowl filled with displeasure, Orba carefully paid attention to their conversation. He needed to grasp their personalities and confirm what kind of power relation he held with them.

This is also a battle.

"Could you cheer up a bit?" Ineli popped up from behind and said with a smile. He was riding together with her. Her surprisingly slender arms wrapped around his waist.

"I really shouldn't have come." Orba averted her eyes. "I wanted to sleep for one more day."

"That won't do. If the prince had not received an invitation, then even we wouldn't be forced to meet with that boorish Rogue," The one who elatedly stuck out his tongue was Troa Hergei. The young boy stuck his head out from under the mounted horse, leaving it as something to be pitied.

In a bored tone, Baton Cadmus began, "What? Rogue's place again?

"That's right. Have you always had such a close relationship with him?"

"He supported me during my first campaign. He wouldn’t stop going on about how he wanted to tell me war stories, and how I should keep him company at least once."

"Oh? Support in battle, you say. No less expected of the future successor to the Mephius Empire, it seems that you cannot stay as the children that we are. Support and the like, with all due respect, those are unthinkable words you just spoke. Could it be that you've slowly outgrown those playful times with us?"

Only a year older than the prince—and consequently two years older than Orba---Baton talking while assuming an air of superiority was, frankly, a mood dampener. He held a prominent physique, but his speech and mannerisms clearly showed he was nothing more than a child at heart.

That fuckin’ scumbag of a noble.

It wasn't only Baton, but all of the other boys looked down on Prince Gil as well. To be hanging out with such a company of friends would mean Gil was either brain-dead or had a very capable personality.

Before long, they commanded a view of the Black Sword that stood in the centre of Solon to their left, as thunder rang across the hillside, and they finally arrived at Rogue Saian's mansion.

Rogue opened the gates, and greeted everyone with a smile across his face.

"Oh, if it isn't the prince. I'm sorry for troubling you to come here. You're in good health, I hope. After all, the prince is still young. You eat to your heart's content to replenish your vigour, drink until your blood turns hot, and fend off all sorts of illnesses in a moment's notice."

The aged but hearty Rogue was already in the yard grilling meat, and laying out several types of wine. Before his arrival, Gowen exchanged grins with Orba in anticipation. Once the head supervisor, he now served as a commanding officer of the crown prince's Imperial Guards. They had hit it off in the previous campaign, as veterans of battle, and since then, had been on good terms.

"Oh?"

The neighbouring Hou Ran had caught Baton's attention. Her skin shone a brilliant ebony under the bask of the sun.

"If this race of people isn't a rare sight in Solon. Whose guest is she?"

"She's my foster daughter. Hou Ran is also an acting officer in the Imperial Guards."

Gowen replied to the impolite Baton's question with a slight change in expression. After the battle at Zaim Fortress, she was not permitted to enter the Imperial Guards' living quarters. So Orba had given her another house, and made her live under Gowen's adoption.

Baton never stopped his curious stares. During this predicament, Hou Ran completely disregarded the boys' conversation. It really was Ran-like of her, and Orba could barely contain himself.

Rogue's wife came out, leading a small child by the hand and offered her greetings.

"This is Mephius' prince. Romus, aren't you also going to greet him?" Rogue urged the child.

He was a boy about twelve, thirteen years old, and possessed an atmosphere similar to Dinn's that differed him from an outspoken boy, and a mouth that only let out slight mumbles. He quickly sank back behind Rogue.

"That's a cute grandson you have there."

"Not at all! He's a good-for-nothing son."

And with just that outburst, Ineli refrained herself from voicing any further impressions. Rogue's wife certainly seemed far younger than he was.

"The only trait he has inherited is that cowardice of mine. Even now, he is afraid to go out in the company of others. It makes me wonder if he'll be able to get through his adult ceremony in one piece like this."

The founding festival would be held next week. Of course, various events and ceremonies were arranged, and amongst them would be a coming-of-age ceremony for the sons of nobles and distinguished families. And there would also be an event unimaginable to any other country: public riding on a dragon's back. The ceremony used baby dragons barely several months old, but whose fangs were more than enough to bite through an adult in his prime and kill him. In the past, victims would pop up in this same way every year.

Unlike the past, it was rarely held at present. Once every few years, the houses like the Saian family, bearing a lineage of military commanders, would hold an event to show off their prided sons. This time, Rogue surely intended to have his son participate.

"I implore your highness to stop my husband. That sort of ceremony is entirely impossible for Romus. All he will remember is the atrocious scene that will unfold—
"

"Stop it. Do not trouble his highness with our family circumstances. Don't worry, he'll train hard for this day. Won't you, Romus?"

Romus offered neither assent nor dissent, only gazing up at his father in faintheartedness, unable to decide whether he was more afraid of the dragon or of angering his father.

Rogue said he had borrowed a young dragon from the army's military training camp for Romus to practice and get accustomed to.

"One day, I feel he will want to enter a training school to become a Winged Dragon Officer. But first, Romus must be able to exude a noble spirit before large crowds."

A winged dragon—literally a dragon with wings, was however, an existence found only in the southern volcanic islands of the planet.

Referred to as winged dragon officers in Mephius, qualified commanders were charged with authority over an upwards of a hundred men and tasked with the operation of flying vessels, namely dragonstone ships. Rogue Saian himself was a winged dragon officer and held the authority to take command of entire fleets.

"Now, if you're done with your meal then go take care of the dragons, Romus. You need all the practice you can."

Romus once again gave a conventional farewell in response to his father's words and took his leave.

Orba and the others remained seated as the servants of the Saian household cut the meat and vegetables into pieces, and prepared the wine. Orba refused the wine with a hand gesture. He never had a strong tolerance for alcohol, and who knew what he might let out in a drunken stupor. During the course of their meal, Rogue told stories of the battlefield. Orba did nothing more than attest to them.

"We aren't exactly interested in your story," Baton and the others bluntly pointed out boredly. The only one who showed interest was surprisingly, the female Ineli. She listened intently to the circumstances revolving around the battle in excitement.

"Princess, I can see you hold the spirit of a warrior." Rogue said brimming with delight. "I only wish my own son could be like that."

The story eventually reached the point where, thanks to the prince's quick wittedness, they were able to march into the fortress where several strong warriors lay in wait. And then Ineli suddenly clapped her hands as she remembered something.

"That's right. I've always been meaning to hear about it if I ever met with brother. Wasn’t the one who defeated Ryucown was a gladiator? I was really surprised when I heard his name. Brother, do you remember him? You know, that Iron Tiger Orba!

Orba, who was just drinking tea at the moment, entered into a choking fit.

"You saw it at Ba Roux, right? The one who saved me from that Sozos dragon!"

"Y-Yeah."

"Did you know he became a member of your Imperial Guards? If that's the case, can't you let me meet him one time?"

"What's going to happen when you meet the supposed gladiator?"

Not paying any mind to Baton's grimace of a response,

"I never thanked him for that time he saved me from the dragon. And I wanted to talk with the one who personally exchanged blows with General Ryucown. Just what kind of gentleman was General Ryucown, and how skilled was he was with a sword? Doesn't thinking about it leave you trembling in excitement? I'm so close to the person who practically experienced the scene that would leave its mark in history!"

Ineli continued to be engrossed in her talk. Without realizing she had made Orba's expression darken,

"Ahh, it would've been so great if Ryucown had been captured and made to fight Orba in a one-on-one within the arena . The battle at the fortress could redone, and if Orba managed to take the head of Ryucown then, the festival would bustle at its peak—"

Boom! Orba had slammed his cup onto the table, causing Ineli's voice to taper off. Orba was trembling, and everyone's attention quickly turned towards him.

"Prince."

The one who leaned his body forward was Gowen. He poured tea into Orba's now empty cup. His eyes stared into Orba's, urging him not to be so emotional. Orba drew back his chin and gave a nod.

Turning to face Ineli, "You will soon," he said hoping to smooth things out.

"Really?"

"But assuming you do meet him, he's really not an interesting person. He also has no proper etiquette. All he'll do is leave you with an unpleasant experience."

"Well, that's acceptable; I'm rather lenient with that. I don't expect the different people of this world to adopt a similar behaviour. You can't chat in the same language with your dragon after years of tending to its needs, can you?"

Orba made an effort to prevent his feelings of discomfort from showing on his face. The incident with Hou Ran suddenly weighed on his mind. He thought it was about time the girl who told him of the dragon's 'voice' suddenly intruded into their conversation, but she was no where to be found.

While everyone was having a pleasant chat, Baton took the opportunity to leave his seat. Orba noticed that his eyes darted around restlessly as he was walked, as if he was searching for someone.

In between the mansion and on the other end of the garden was an established cell. Within it was a child Baian. Its length was roughly two metres. Since some time back, the dragon had been lowering its head and incessantly sticking its forked tongue in and out, hissing menacingly at Romus who stood before the cage.

He kept his distance for a while, eyeing the Baian in horror, but braced himself and, holding a bundle of meat from the garden in his hand, approached the dragon. With legs nearing full development and claws as sharp as a sword, it could hardly be called a baby dragon.

Romus quickly tossed the meat. However, it landed directly in front of the cage. Romus approached no further, trying his best in an attempt to kick it in.

Gawrr, the dragon roared, as it violently rammed its head against the cage. Baton fell backwards and frantically tried to scurry away. The Baian stuck its long tongue through the gap and slipped the food into its mouth.

"You...!"

The young Romus lost his temper. "You, you, you, you, you!" He took a three-pronged spear leaning beside the cage into his hand. It was a tool for use against dragons. The ends were blunted, so that it could be shoved in between the cage bars without wounding the dragon, but Romus brandished the weapon as if he were about to slay his foe and gave a thrust to the dragon's head.

The dragon shook its head as it gave out loud wails. He thrust a second time, and on the third, he struck near the eye. He pursued the overwrought, retreating dragon with deep thrusts. As he was doing so, his hand was suddenly grabbed from the side, startling Romus.

It was Hou Ran. The hand flung him to the side. Romus once again lay on his bottom, as the roars of the dragon reverberated with the force of a cannon in his ear. Using its rearfoot to stand, the dragon proceeded to bare its fangs as it clung to the cage. Romus' face lost colour. He was thrown off his guard, and the dragon continued to draw closer, surely planning to attack him in one fell swoop.

"Be careful," Ran spoke.

For a moment, Romus wasn't sure if she was speaking to him or the dragon. Then the girl stretched her hand through the cage and gently stroked the Baian's throat.

He watched in amazement as the Baian, who didn't listen to anything until just recently, emitted a gentle groan, stopped standing on its rear feet, and lowered its head. Hou Ran bent down and caressed its forehead.

"Come."

Ran extended her other hand and called Romus over. Partially pale hair could be seen on her dark skin. Committing this mysterious figure to heart, he nervously brought himself closer.

"Are you scared of the dragon?"

"I-I'm not scared. I mean, he could attack you even like this."

"Because you're afraid of the dragon, the dragon is also afraid of you."

"Eh?"

Romus winced, not because of the unexpected remark, but because she grasped his hand and brought it in the direction of the cage.

"Baby dragons especially, have hearts like a mirror. It reflects your own heart. Look into its eyes and feel it."

He took a breath, and gazed into the dragon's glassy eyes. Of course, he couldn't perceive any of its emotions. But for some reason, he never let go of Hou Ran's hand, and he slowly, steadily brought himself closer to the dragon's scales—and touched it.

He shrank back his shoulders and back, two, and then three times. It wasn't that he was scared. In those parts, he could feel a hot sensation transmitted there, and most prominent was an impact as if he received several blows to the forehead.

When he realized what it was, he broke into tears, as Ran hugged his back.

"You're a strong child," Ran whispered into his ear. "And there is potential in you. You heard its 'voice', right? You don't have to be afraid of the dragon anymore. But you also shouldn't show your back too often. Dragons and humans are different; the way they tie a trusting relationship, the way they talk, the way they spend their time, and the way they get happy. You should spend some time understanding it."

"Well isn't this a sight for sore eyes."

The joke came as Baton Cadmus revealed himself. Romus, ashamed of his crying, quickly stood up and wiped his eyes. Baton approached in long strides and stopped in front of Hou Ran.

"You say you were in an all-male slave detention camp? Just what were you doing there? Did you help the men relieve them of their boredom?"

Hou Ran stared back at him, unimpressed. Baton licked his lips, like a prey stalking a predator.

"You aren't too bad."

"Really."

"A woman like you that stinks of dragon dung once in a while isn't bad at all. Even if you're a part of the Imperial Guards, you must be bored, right? You should work in my mansion. I'll make it a 'good' experience. Way better than those crude sword slaves or uselessly large dragons could ever give you."

Hou Ran was about to say something, when she suddenly glanced over. Leaning against the wall over Baton's shoulders was Orba, staring straight at her. In response, Ran faced the young noble, her lips creviced to reveal a stunning smile.

"I like strong men."

"That's right. And I have power," Baton grinned widely. "Enough to keep you."

"That's not good enough. You'll have to at least show me your strength, like this child did."

Ran pointed her hand towards Romus, and then to the Baian within the cage. "Ha," Baton sneered.

"Are dragons all the standard for you people of the Ryuujin Faith? If that kid can do it, there's no way I can't. I even brought down a Baian in last year's dragon hunting. A baby dragon like this is nothing."

With a crank of his shoulders, Baton stepped up to the Baian and touched its lowered head. Baton gave a triumphant smile and turned back around, not noticing how Hou Ran's gaze went through him, and focused on the dragon.

A string of saliva hung from the Baian's mouth, when it opened and gave a roar before it stood up.

"W-Waahhh!"

The startled Baton jumped back. The dragon fervently swung its claws out between the bars of the cage. Baton scrambled away, severely banging his hip in the process, not stopping until he was sure to have reached a safe place. His face was completely pale.

"That's too bad."

With a thin smile, Hou Ran flung back her hair and turned around, to give a despising glare at the figure. She came up to Orba. Before he could call out to her, she beat him to it.

"You were testing me."

She stomped on his feet. Orba jumped up from the unexpected assault.

"You were watching what I was doing. You knew it wasn't your place. And still you thought to bring our friendship closer. So you tested me."

"W-wait up. Hey, Hou Ran..."

It was exactly as she said, but Orba never imagined it would make her this mad. In a way, he understood less about a girl's feelings than of the dragons' 'voice'.

Part 3

Dinn used the time while the prince had gone out to thoroughly clean up the room. Doing so alone would have been too heavy a labour, so he spoke with the grand chamberlain and acquired help from several others. It wasn't unusual for several people to be tasked to look after a member of the imperial family. The one who arranged for Dinn alone to be entrusted with the duty was none other than Fedom, for fear that Orba's true colours would be brought to light. The official reason was because the hot-tempered prince could trust no other chamberlain except Dinn.

In any case, he was finished shortly after noon. The other chamberlains took their leave, and as he let out a sigh of relief, the bell announcing visitors rang. The soldiers acting as the room bodyguards had rung it.

Somehow, Dinn had a bad feeling about this.

"Did something bad happen?"

Ineli stealthily whispered in his ear, pointing to Baton, who was clearly in a bad mood. Her playful expression annoyed Orba.

"He failed to make a pass on a girl. Leave him be."

He answered, more or less now used to it. Ineli giggled, and taking Orba's hand, joined it around her surprisingly slender arms. It was a rather skillful play, and then Orba felt her call out to the side,

"What are you going to do now, Baton? If you want to go back and weep, I won't be stopping you."

"Don't kid around. There's a place I want to check out. It's a well-known store that even the prince would happily approve of."

It was a given that Orba had no way of knowing, but for Baton, this would be the day's main event.

The horses were left in the Saian residence, and Baton was the first to take the lead and begin walking.

The southwestern district was divided by the Sazan River from the area of the palace and nobles' residence. Once they treaded on the Town District, they made a few turns here and there, and separated from the main road. There was a smell of garbage waste, prompting Ineli to hold her nose. The other boys also exchanged worried looks.

"Are you sure this is the right place, Baton?"

Even Troa, who should have been aware of the plan, worriedly asked this. Baton snorted.

They were raised as the sons of well-off families after all.

It was unlikely that nobles would set foot into this sort of place in the absence of bodyguards. But to Baton, it was a familiar sight. Sick of his usual days of boredom, he would often frequent such places. It was a part of his own ventures to seek out thrills.

"Hey, hold up."

Several poorly dressed men came from the direction of the voice and approached them. One of them whistled.

"Well aren't you a group of rather well-dressed young masters."

"It's dangerous here ya know, because there's a whole bunch of bad people around. They'll quickly strip you of your belongings."

"Because we're nice people, we'll help you guys out of here, so if you'd offer us something of value, that'll make us *really* happy."

They were dressed in dregs, giving off the appearance of thugs, but all of them were acquaintances of Baton.

They conferred the financially well off Baton the position of leader, and often hung out in 'groups' around these parts. At times, they would go as far as to simulate blackmailings and stealings.

"Don't screw with me," Baton got fired up, according to plan. "As if we would even give the least bit of money to get past guys like you. You guys that don't know your place, scram!"

"What was that?!"

The person in front spat out saliva and then drew a dagger from his back.

Ineli shrank back as she instinctively let out a scream. Baton casually pat her on the back, "It's an act," he told in a small voice. He continued,

"How shall we go about this..."

He stared at the seemingly dumbfounded prince. The prince had been silent the whole time. Baton held the contemptuous thought that he was left shaking in his boots at a lost for words.

He succeeded with his first campaign, they say? And just what can this spoiled prince do in such a kill-on-sight situation?

For a while now, the two may have held a relationship where they would gallivant about together, but within Baton's heart, he had looked down on the prince this whole time. He felt himself a far more capable man. But now that prince was hailed as a hero. For this reason, he wanted to make a fool out of him in public. He wanted to make them see the prince's abilities in a new light.

There was no way for Baton to know, of course, the feelings that Gil—Orba was harbouring at the time. Because he would never imagine that Gil had switched places with a former gladiator, it also wasn't too much of a stretch that Orba held a strange feeling of nostalgia.

The fixed smell, alleyways, threatened extortion by pointing blades, and the stealing—

These were all the only things he experienced as a child. In the few years after the time Oubary had burned down his village until he was made to become a gladiator, he had lived sipping the muddy waters from the worst parts of town.

Before his eyes, he saw a great many men brandishing their daggers.

"Now, what's the matter? If your mouths aren't working, then how about I force it open for you."

The boy pointed his dagger at Orba's mouth. Orba didn't turn away, carefully looking past the blade and observing his opponents. They numbered four. All of them most likely carried weapons. He wore a pistol and dagger on his back. If he could seize a chance, he was fully confident he could beat them, but he couldn't afford to do it too skilfully in the presence of Ineli and the others.

Now then—

As Orba thought of a prince-like behaviour that might get them out of this situation, Baton suddenly reached out his hand and knocked away the dagger in front of the prince's mouth.

"You shouldn't go too far with your pranks, or you'll be in for a world of pain," Baton said with a triumphant air.

He was already satisfied, having been able to make a show of the prince's worthlessness in front of his best friends.

"We are Mephian nobility. If you so much as inflict a wound on us, you lot would be hung in the blink of an eye. We'll overlook this. Now scram!"

That was the arranged key phrase, but the opposing men showed not even the smallest indication of being daunted; they were smirking. And to make matters worse,

"Oh? Nobility you say."

Startled, Baton turned around to face the voice that called out. There were another three men drawing closer, dressed in rags just like the others. But he had no recollection assigning them as cast in this play.

"Now that I look more closely, I'd say you're the real thing. We heard your little chat and couldn't help to think what awfully mighty things you said."

"Well isn't this a bigger catch than I imagined."

"You bastards!" Baton let out in a low voice. He was well aware of the colour draining from his face. They had went along with Baton's proposed plan and laid a trap on their end.

"W-what are you going to do? If it's money you really want, I'll be sure to later..."

"We don't need your loose change, Cadmus boy. With this many hostages, they wouldn't mind if we demanded even more money, right?"

Ineli once again gave another shrill scream; one of the thugs had laid his hands on her dress.

"Those're some nice *garbs* yer wearin'. I wanna bring 'em home to my daughter."

"L-let go! You low-life, get your filthy hands off me!"

Ineli slapped his cheek. It was a reflexive action that tensed the situation.

"This wench."

"Who's the real filthy one, you damn Mephian nobles. Do it."

"W-wait! Wait I tell you!"

Baton shouted, as Ineli's legs gave way. With a frantic expression,

"T-The one over here is Mephius' crown prince. You should get that there's no way you'll get away with it..."

"The prince, you say?"

A joyous countenance flashed across their faces contrary to Baton's expectations, but one of them directed eyes full of hatred on their 'guest'. He was the oldest man in the group.

"Prince Mephius! Who would have thought I would be able to meet him here. He is the bane of Layla, and the one person I mustn't let escape."

Again, the same man acted alone and drew his sword. The drawn sword left the young nobles speechless and frozen stiff, as one of them thought,

Layla?

Upon hearing the name for the first time, he committed her connection with these men to memory.

"First, let's have you hand over that gun. Actually, stay right there. I'll take it."

As per the instructions of the man who first drew his sword, Orba reached his hands towards his back.

The time that seemingly stood still continued to flow. Orba quickly reached towards the other half of his body and drew the gun from his back. "Wait," as his fellow thugs called out, Orba swiftly pulled the trigger quickly.

Having been shot on the midfoot, the man fainted in agony. Orba didn't hesitate. In a situation where the enemies numbered many, missing a chance to strike the first blow was fatal.

"You asshole!"

"Long as he's alive, I don't give a damn! The gun, slice his whole arm off!"

He nimbly dodged the man that slashed at him from behind.

"Run!" Orba shouted. He practically kicked Baton from behind, pushing him towards the side. They didn't need any more prompting, and as the other thugs gave chase to the boys, they were met with another round of bullets. They toppled sideways as blood gushed out of their bodies.

"Now you've done it!"

The remaining men all rushed towards Orba. They were at point-blank range, and Orba, deeming that the pistol couldn't properly be handled at point-blank, kicked the knee of the man in front, snatching the short sword from his hands. Twice, thrice he repelled the pouring onslaught of daggers.

A colour of surprise and impatience hung on the dirt-covered mens' faces. They had agreed to kidnap the younger nobles, and had more or less resolved themselves, but having let everyone escape, the nobles would surely come back and rain retribution down on them.

"This brat!"

With unexpected skill, he slashed downwards, diagonally across the shoulders of a stumbling man. "Surround him!" and the instant Orba heard the bellow, jumped back to the rear. He blocked the pursuing blade using the katana grasped in his right

hand to perform an upwards sweeping motion, and with the dagger strapped to his back, stabbed the man in the chest with his left.

If he were to diminish their numbers, then their chances of success would drastically decrease. He whirled the sword on his right in arcs, and the foes continued to fall amidst the clattering, until only a single man was left. He was the man who had cried out 'bane of Layla'.

"Y-You-You bastard!!"

He gripped his blade, ready to strike. The man's stubble-covered face trembled in its entirety, as he glared at Orba. But it wasn't Orba he hated. It was a person possessing the same appearance as he, whom the man detested.

Just as he was about to attack, Orba fired a shot near his feet. "Hiiii," the man jumped, and collapsed on his bottom.

"Who is Layla?" Orba asked, as he established his aim.

"D-Don't play dumb! I won't let you say you forgot you did to Layla."

"Say it." He thrust the muzzle up his chin, "Who is Layla? And what do you mean by getting revenge?"

Quite some time passed, as Orba caught up with Ineli and the others along the bank of Sazan River.

"B-Brother."

Ineli gazed at Orba as if she was seeing a dead one come back to life. Orba collapsed onto the floor on the spot, pretending to have barely escaped from a near-death situation."

"Are you ok?"

"B-Barely. You guys, wasn't it a bit too much to run away and leave me behind like that?"

"That's....Your Highness himself was the one who said to run," one of the boys said, but Orba made a face as if he didn't remember it at all.

In the end, after it was clear that everyone had made it out safely, Ineli's expression turned into one that completely relished in the thrill, and returned to her usual self.

"I would have never thought you would suddenly just shoot."

"It was really sudden for me too, and I don't really remember it all that well."

"Hey, Your Highness? Don't get too mad after hearing about it, okay? All of this was...."

"Ine-Princess Ineli." Baton coughed violently to interrupt Ineli. "Please keep the information regarding that matter c-c-confidential."

Even though Ineli was short of breath, she floated a smile across her face. Orba could somewhat guess what it was about, but kept his mouth shut. Ineli planned to, under the leverage of the 'secret', toy with Baton to the utmost.

At any rate.

The matter regarding the aforementioned 'Layla' weighed on Orba's mind. According to what he heard from the man he threatened, Gil Mephius had exercised the privilege exclusive to the imperial family, 'right to the first night', on a local bride. That was Layla. Her father was an officer of the Imperial Guards directly under the control of the emperor, but following the incident, he explained to the relatives and close friends invited to the wedding.

"It is the prince's usual dalliance. Nothing will happen," he explained.

No one was convinced. But this staked on his daughter’s honour, and the imperial officer made them swear to never reveal this matter to others. After that, they never saw the father and daughter again. Their mansion in the city of Solon had also, at one point, been sold off. Rumours spread of how they had been killed to silence them, and before long, talk of this matter ceased.

The man Orba questioned was also a distant relative of Layla.

In constant fear of when an assassin might come, he had lost all will to work, and went as far as to perform the activities of a night thief that he held himself in contempt for. He loathed the Mephian nobles and most of all, Gil Mephius.

"I understand now."

Once he had finished hearing everything, Orba set down his gun. He departed, leaving the fallen men lying in the pools of blood.

Rone Jayce.

An officer of the Imperial Guards. This was worth investigating. The disturbance of the 'right of first night' occurred just before Orba was made into Gil's body double. Moreover, Gil shared a bed with Layla in a barroom, when the man witnessed none other than Fedom running into the room.

What happened there…?

On the way back, under the swaying of the horse, Orba was lost in thought.

"Your Highness," Ineli reached over from behind and gently prodded Orba, signalling the sun was already setting.

"Lord Zaat is here."

"Ah," Orba unintentionally let out. Emerging from the store along with several men armed with swords acting as bodyguards was a man clad in what could easily be identified as clothing for a noble, and Oubary Bilan. These two stopped moving, seeming to have noticed the prince.

"If this isn't the prince. What an unusual place to have met you. I take it you are in good health."

Oubary's thin, spread, purple lips broke to form a smile. Just seeing his face was enough for Orba to feel his body heat up, and he was only able to respond with a light nod. And the other person was:

Zaat Quark.

With the portraits Dinn had laid out, he was able to roughly remember the faces of the leading nobles. He was a member of the Founding Imperial Council. The House of Quark had been around since the founding of Mephius, and remained a distinguished family in the successive generations. While gazing at Orba with a grand demeanour and eyes filled with vigour, he opened his mouth.

"Congratulations on your first successful campaign.....A month has already passed since then, as I now remember at this late hour, but I regret to inform you that I have not had a chance to visit you since then. His Imperial Majesty has also been left worried. How about you show him your face tomorrow, if not earlier?"

"Oh, okay."

"If the other nobles were to see that the prince, who is supposed to be laying in bed ill, is playing around in such a place, there will be no stopping them from speaking ill of you. Mephius is more or less on the verge of rebellion. As you are an important prince, do take care."

He indeed spoke with a refined demeanour and yet gentle tone, notwithstanding the piercing glint in his eyes. Zaat was not one of the twelve generals, but carried the vestiges of the House of Quark that once held dominion over the position. Compared to genuine military commanders like Rogue or Oubary, he held few soldiers and should not have personally stood in a battlefield before. But those eyes just now were exactly the kind that intently fixed themselves on the enemy.

So...he's the head of the anti-imperial faction?

He hadn't received this information from Dinn, but remembered Fedom mentioning it at one point. Zaat appeared to be the most opposed to Kaiser Islan's imprisonment. Would the prince have faltered from this? As Orba held this thought, it was suddenly cut short.

"Well then, please excuse me."

After courteously leaving his message, he departed with Oubary. Orba stared at the form of the two men boarding the coach that had been waiting in front of the store, or more exactly, at Oubary alone.

One day, Orba swore in his mind.

One day I'll burn you to death. That's right, 'one day'. Not now. I'm not so nice as to just kill you now.

"It's better to not worry about it, brother."

Ineli took Gil's lapse of silence to mean he had fallen depressed over the indirect reprehension of their idling. She smiled while patting him on the back.

"Still, what a strange combination," one of the boys cocked his head. "I've never seen the two of them get along so well together until now."

"Whatever. Let's just hurry and go back. We'll be sorry to receive the fussings of another important person.

Or so Baton said, but even now, his face paled. It was obvious to everyone he was terrified of what other troubles he might find himself caught up in.

What a weird day.

Orba thought as he walked through the palace passage.

A lot of things happened, but at present, the prince's closest of friends had yet to suspect his true colours. It could be considered his first of steps. It was absolutely necessary to obtain all the rights and privileges the prince held, and to do so, he needed to be able to put up with the various worthless happenings.

Be that as it may, the unaccustomed battles had left him exhausted, body and mind.

"Dinn," he called out to the page once he had opened the door. "I won't be needing a bath or a meal today."

"And you also won't be—"

"Prince."

Orba noticed Dinn wore an expression of discomfort. The prince's room was a continuation of three rooms, and the first door that was opened led to a small room where chairs and a counter were arranged to let a waiting visitor settle in.

In there, the shadow of a figure could be seen sitting in moody silence. With a single glance, Orba's fatigue had somewhat left him. It was Garbera's third princess, Vileena. With her rich, silver hair hanging on her back, the dignified beauty looked up directly at Orba.

"I welcome you back, Your Highness the Crown Prince, Gil." "

"Y, Yeah."

"Pray tell me, where did you head off to?"

"Well, that is—oh, I was invited to the general's house."

"You *certainly* seem to be in good health."

Each and every one of them says the exact same thing.

Such a thought crossed his head. He planned to restrain the feeling, but it must have showed on his face.

"Did I perhaps say something odd? I am an unaccustomed guest in Mephius after all. I am not privy to the culture and humour of this country. That is to say, I'd like for us to come to an immediate understanding, or at the very least, for you to firmly answer me."

"What are you trying to say?" Orba angrily glared at the girl two years younger than him. "This isn't very princess-like. If there's something you want to say, then say it frankly."

"Is that so. Then, let's be frank. Prince, are you aware of the matter regarding Kaiser Islan?"

"Yes."

"Is *yes* all you have to say?" her starry-eyed pupils widened.

"Like I said, what are you trying to say? Just state your business."

"That's already enough."

With a red face, Vileena got up from her seat. Orba wanted to lie down and rest, if even a second earlier, but this attitude only served to stoke his ire.

"What do you mean *that's enough*? I haven't heard anything yet."

"I wondered if you had collapsed due to the illness, to find you roaming about until this late. If you were agonizing over this country's future, you must have at least given it some thought; from the looks of it, the issue hasn't weighed on your mind the least bit. No matter what I tell you, it would be pointless."

"You have some nerve, discreetly criticizing others you hardly know on nothing but speculation."

He had just managed to keep up a mask of appearances in front of the group of close friends, and somehow, before this fourteen year old princess, it had crumbled away to dust. Most likely, the princess said the one thing that shouldn't be said.

"There are things a child cannot understand. Before you go meddling in people's business, how about you first go and grow up, princess?"

"I most certainly will!"

In an instant, Vileena stood up with great force, and faster than Dinn could let out an 'Ah', pressed towards Orba. Thinking the force would be transmitted through an open palm, Orba reflexively pressed his back against the wall.

"Good day!"

Leaving those sharp words, Vileena *stomped* her way out of the room in a manner unbefitting a princess.

Orba loosened his back, as he slumped down against the wall.

First Ran, and now this princess.

"I'm also to blame," Dinn said with a bit too sad of a look.

"When the princess came in the afternoon, I explained to her that you had gone out with your friends."

"Then what time will he be returning?" the princess had asked. Thinking it would be bad if the prince took too long to play around, Dinn gave the insubstantial response of, "He'll be back immediately."

"I had repeatedly told her, 'Once he comes back, I would immediately contact them', but she continued to wait in this manner...."

It was afternoon, and then it was already four, and now had passed 5 o'clock. Orba let out a long sigh.

There's no time to rest, for as long as I deceive this whole country. Damnit, I let my guard down."

There was no doubt Vileena would once again become a threat in Orba's continued battle to fake his current position. Of course, because this was Orba, he had failed to notice even the slightest that Vileena Owell's dress was more daring than usual.

Chapter 2: Days at the Imperial Capital

Part 1

Prior to the beginning of the founding festival, the people of Mephius, especially the inhabitants within the imperial capital of Solon, were enlivened. The ten year war

with Garbera had ended, the number of peddlers and travellers from other countries would increase, and the circus troupe would also arrive from the east. The end of the war might have led to the beginning of varied opinions on the resist-to-the-bitter-end faction, but for the citizens, just looking forward to being able to partake in the festivities was more than enough to leave them delighted.

In the following week, Solon would be dyed the colour of the festival. For those that grew up in an environment enclosed within cliffs and valleys, those of various attires, different dispositions, the uncultured, and also the so-called 'plain' Mephians, this was the only time they could freely dress up, drink at the stands that completely filled up the halls and streets, and relish the usually sparse seafood in Mephius, as the orchestra, minstrels, troupes and attractions pleased their eyes and ears.

Mephius' reputed gladiator games would, of course, be held for days in succession. The distinguished gladiatorial groups from each region would all be gathered in one place, where those who bragged of their strength would duke it out in the imperial capital of Solon's arena, which made all others appear lacking in lustre and awfully plain by comparison. Many from distant lands had shown up just to see this grand, magnificent gladiator fest.

And, every year, the arena in the imperial capital hosting this festival would hold a different theme. Amongst the gladiators who had survived day after day of fighting, the Guild would carefully select between the ones with real ability, especially those garnering high popularity, until the final four men were chosen. And for each, a one-on-one battle would be held. Then the two victors would, in the last day, accompanied by two hundred gladiators that had yet to participate in a match, fight against several large dragons—the last and biggest event of the founding festival.

It had been modelled after one of Mephius' most popular historical figures, the Dragon-slaying hero, Clovis, who, together with the support of Felipe, fought to the very end. Despite being gladiators, they had been bestowed the same title, and released from their status as sword-slave. Furthermore, they had been officially employed as Mephian soldiers. In this day and age, the sword-slaves trained even harder than usual at this time of year in hopes they would be able to participate in the tournament.

Speaking of which, Tarkas never got invited in the end.

At times like this, he would usually be in a sour mood. The Tarkas Gladiatorial Group was comparatively fairly large and certainly well known, but the company, having been brought up in a single generation, held weak relations with the nobles and nearly no say within the guild..

"If it's Shique, I can get some money. Gilliam too, he certainly is the people of Solon's favourite giant. And then there's Kain; I'd like to see someone that can best him in a tank shooting match against two Baian tanks."

Orba recalled him speaking those words. Put in Tarkas' words, Orba was a gladiator that didn't give him his money's worth. His forte was the longsword; he never lost a one-on-one match. But it was a fact that his fighting style was 'plain'.

It had been Tarkas' dream to participate in the festival and get first place, but Orba held no interest in it. He wanted the festival in Solon to quickly start and receive it, and it was because Orba thought this way, that he didn't understand the way the world ran.

Though, of course, he would do so not as the gladiator Orba, but as the crown prince Gil. Instead of going out into the gladiator games, he had a number of other duties to perform.

The evening before the start of the festival, the Mephius royalty and chief vassals took the lead in the celebration of founding day, holding a ritual to pray for a good harvest in the coming year. In the centre of Solon stood the Black Tower, also known as the "Sword forged from the remains of a Space Immigrant Ship's bow". The tower was a symbol of the capital, and situated below was the Dragon God Shrine. It was a naturally formed cave, and they were quickly enveloped in a freezing chill upon entering.

Everyone wore the hoods of their robes and walked in silence. Incidentally, participation of this ceremony was restricted to the men. There were no exceptions for royalty, and amongst them, the presence of Empress Melissa and her daughter Ineli were nowhere to be found.

The one acting as vanguard and holding the lamps was not the emperor, but several elderly men with dark brown skin. They were thin, but treaded robustly. These were nomads of the Ryuujin Faith who usually lived in the mountains.

All preparations for the Dragon God ritual were handled by the group of elders. This was an old custom dating back to the days when people all throughout Mephius worshipped the Dragon God. Soon, they arrived at the inner sanctum. Their feet stopped, and they waited patiently as the group of elders offered a prayer in ancient words.

Engraved on the towering wall before them was the Mephius Dragon God bestowing wisdom and power to the founding emperor.

It was a vast, dimly lit space. The lamp kindled and the deep, profound voices of the elders chanting could be heard as their shadows projected onto the wall. The sanctity of the ritual sent shivers down Orba's spine.

So this is also something I must get used to.

Just how much more of this did he have to learn by heart and get used to? If they were to be drilled into his head, he might even end up respecting the nobles and royalty a little. As Orba held such baseless thoughts, his eyes met with Fedom, who flashed him a silent look of reprehension that seemed to say, 'Stop flapping your head all over the place!'

Once the prayer had concluded its end, the elders moved down a passage leading to a considerably narrow room, and they alone exchanged drinks. It wasn't a part of their banquet, but another form of paying their respect. The party on the eve of the founding festival would take place come nightfall in the central hall within the inner palace, where the remaining nobles and countries' envoys awaited them.

As they headed towards the room, Simon Rodloom called out, "Prince."

Fedom looked at Orba during this sudden predicament, but to his relief, Orba did not turn to meet his gaze. Simon was a leader amidst all the others. Who knew how long he could have been lurking behind Fedom.

Simon started off with a formal greeting, offering a 'good health' salutation like all the others.

"It's not bad. Everyone's fussing too much over it, so it got blown up a bit."

According to Dinn's reports, Simon was regarded as the prince's attending nursemaid, much to his displeasure. Orba had acted correspondingly.

"The young prince is the man of the hour, after all. Speaking of which, you performed a splendid job with your first campaign."

"*Unexpectedly* splendid, is what you want to say, right?"

"Yes, pardon my discreetness."

"Everyone's surprised after seeing my real abilities. It's because of the way I've been up to now that everyone is probably feeling uneasy. Hmph, like I'd care if they started minding me now."

Rodloom smiled at his bitter expression.

Not bad at all.

Orba impressed with his own acting. After all, he only had to play the part of a simpleton.

Afterwards, Orba continued his act as 'the prince elated with his activities in his first campaign.'

“Did you meet Princess Vileena after that?”

The unexpected jab had momentarily left him short of a response.

“It has been the talk of the maids—those gossipy chattering sparrows, that Her Royal Highness had intruded into your room and firmly scolded you on your late return; such rumours have spread.”

“Me, scolded by that princess? Madness!”

A part of what he spouted wasn’t an act, but his real feelings. Simon broke off into a smile.

“It’s fine like this. If it’s a single rumour, it might help the princess’ situation.”

“Help her?”

“She was the princess of our enemy until not too long ago, she herself must hold some misgivings and conflicted feelings of her surroundings. But, with this, everyone wil watch over the relationship between the charming prince and princess, and soon enough the people will follow suit.”

“And what will become of my situation? Am I just supposed to shut up and laugh it off?”

“This is the time when the prince should show his talents. Show more concern. You should try to laugh with her about things, and become a lord not to be trifled with. Then she will hold a large amount of good-will towards you.”

“As if I need that sort of good-will.”

“You wouldn’t want this talk to reach his majesty’s ears, would you?”

“...”

“But even His Majesty,” Simon began. It was a private matter, but he decided to turn a blind eye and say it. “In his early years, in those times he fought with Lana-sama, it

was up to me to be the mediator. Once your mother had made up her mind, she would stay firm."

Lana was the emperor's former wife, and Prince Gil's own mother. She had died five years ago from an illness.

Naturally, Orba hardly knew any of this. He avoided giving a response, which Simon kept quiet about, assuming it was because of his own sentiments, as the two proceeded into the chamber.

And it was here where the incident likely to affect the future of Mephius would occur.

It was a narrow, rectangular room. In this part of the cave supported by wood and iron rods were several laid out chairs, just enough to accommodate the group, centred around a crudely-built stone table.

Orba moved to his previously arranged position. One by one, cups were placed before each seat. The bottom contained a small amount of honey. It was custom that the emperor then personally pour the wine. In last year's founding festival, fruit wine had been offered. Of course, this year too, the best wine possible had been prepared to show gratitude for the blessings.

"I pray for a good harvest in Mephius. Spirit of the Dragon God, please grant me your divine protection."

As Guhl Mephius' voice rang, everyone joined in succession. Orba—or rather, Prince Gil, was the last to go. His eyes followed the emperor, now walking with the wine-storing vase held under his arm.

The Mephius emperor.

He was Prince Gil's father, and needless to say, the man who reigned at the top of the empire. And if Orba's reasoning was right, he was the man who planned the secret assassination of Prince Gil and his fiancée, Vileena. If a situation were to occur that would force these two alone, would he be able to deceive him? Orba had no interest in finding out; he might even try to kill him. Though, could a father even mistake an impostor for his own son?

Then the room filled with commotion. The startled Orba watched from the side.

Did I blunder?

His blood instantly froze. However, the one the vassals were looking at wasn't Gil, but the emperor. Their faces filled with surprise and—profound fear. Orba also turned to look. The emperor was pouring wine to the first person. Orba didn't see anything strange happening. The first was an elder nomad of the Ryuujin Faith. The emperor then directed the vase to the next elder.

"Your majesty, please wait."

The one who brought himself forward was Zaat Quark. The dignified demeanour he commanded when they had met on the streets was nowhere to be seen, and his vigorous face distorted in alarm.

"Please wait, your majesty. Lord Rodloom has yet to go."

The room had gone into an uproar since near the beginning of Zaat's interjection. And it wasn't only Zaat; many had impulsively left their seat. Orba also got up and walked two seats over to Fedom, who had changed his face to match the others, and gently tapped him on the back.

"...What are they talking about?"

"F-Fool! Don't speak to me here."

Fedom cursed at him in a low voice, but Orba pressed for an answer with his eyes, leaving him no choice but to speak quickly.

"...Last year, Simon Rodloom was the first to receive the ceremonial wine. It was perfectly natural for something done by rank. The order of pouring reflects the strength of his trust. And to prevent needless strife, the order had been decided beforehand."

That was why the crown prince went last, Fedom seemed to imply. Ranking retainers was another unfamiliar concept for him.

At this point of the explanation, Zaat drew closer before them.

"Your majesty!"

"Silence, Zaat Quark."

Guhl Mephius interrupted hoarsely, but in a sharp, hushed voice. With just that, the emperor had quelled the commotion and he stared at the eyes of his retainers who were frozen in fear.

"What is this, interrupting in the midst of a rite. Cease your actions."

"I will not, your majesty," Zaat said, turning pale, but he did not stop talking. "The way things are being done is not according to our followed customs. With all due respect, how could you put more trust on those nomads and putrid believers than we lords and generals who, for your majesty's sake, have devoted ourselves tirelessly!"

"Zaat, stop it."

None other than Simon grabbed him by the shoulders and tried to control him. But he was a moment too slow, as the emperor's eyes opened wide and ripples on his whole face seemed to violently split open.

"To say this in no other than the Dragon God's shrine! You've quite the nerve, Zaat. You, who defies me like those priests I now hold in contempt, are attempting to pollute this sacred ritual. The benevolent Dragon God shall certainly not bestow his judgment of anger on you, but will instead impose it on me, the emperor that acts as his representative. Depart from here immediately! I shall hand down my sentence afterwards, so you shall return to and be confined in your own mansion. Do you understand, Zaat?!"

"Your majesty."

"Your majesty!"

Orba watched as the situation once again escalated into an uproar. The emperor's face seethed a bright red and he never removed his gaze from Zaat Quark, whose face showed a ghastly blue.

Internal discord amongst the nobles, huh.

He had no intention of mediating and planned to stay out of it. While he subdued the smile that formed around his mouth, a casual sidelong glance at Fedom revealed that there was something odd.

His plump belly jiggled as his body quivered. It might have seemed he was in a panic, as sweat ran down his face, but it was identical to Orba's, with a faint smile that seemed to come and go.

Part 2

The exchange between the emperor and Zaat in the Dragon God Shrine spread within the Main Palace in the blink of an eye. And there was also the matter with Kaiser Islan. Everyone doubted the emperor's way of doing things, but on the other hand, they had resolved themselves to tread cautiously so that they would not be caught in the crossfire.

The arranged founding eve festival celebration had been held as planned and went without incident. There, Orba met with Princess Vileena. It had been ten days since they last met where he received the 'scolding' in his own room. She wore a white, high-collared coat and a Garberan-style skirt with the hem spreading out, and piled under then were Mephian-styled trousers and boots. Theresia had gone through painstaking efforts to coordinate it, unbeknownst to Orba. In the presence of surrounding eyes, the two exchanged greetings as if nothing had happened. And then they were done. Their eyes never met after.

Hmph.

Vileena was angry exactly because the prince adopted such an attitude.

The Imperial Guard delegates who had come along, Shique and Gowen, had no choice but to smile wryly.

"His highness accomplished his first campaign in stride," Shique said shrugging his shoulders. "But when it comes to love, he is like that naïve boy before his first campaign."

"Even those old-timers would lose face when conducting themselves as such. Just what I'd expect of our prince."

Orba disregarded the two as they belittled him within earshot. Then, Gowen lowered his voice, "Putting aside the issue with the princess, it seems lots of things have been happening behind my back."

"What do you mean?"

"In a Solon bar, I met War."

War was originally one of the sword-slaves from the Tarkas group and had participated in the battle at Zaim Fortress. Of the eighty remaining sword-slaves, sixty-two had offered their service into the Imperial Guards. The rest, including the giant gladiator Gilliam, were more than adequately rewarded by being set free. War was also one of those who should have been set free.

"That's reassuring. Is he doing fine?"

“Hmph, he’s quickly grown senile. When I called out to him, he acted like he didn’t recognise me. There must have been some circumstances, so I brought him to a place with just the two of us before I asked questions. It appears to have been the ‘prince’s order’.”

“What order?”

“It seems to have been to become a Mephius mercenary. One under the commander during your first campaign—the one called General Oubary.”

He wanted to hear more from Gowen, but with Ineli and Baton’s appearance, he had no choice but to put it on hold. Forcibly making a smile he was unaccustomed to, he called out in a manner natural for the prince.

Naturally, Ineli and the others wanted to hear about the situation with Zaat Quark, but Orba couldn’t say that everything said by the rumours was all there was to it.

“Everyone is saying that His Imperial Majesty planned to revive the Ryuujin Faith again, just as he did in the western provinces of Tauran.”

“It’d be good if it does no harm. I’d be troubled if I had to change my lifestyle. Would he possibly go as far as to prohibit certain foods?”

“You sure are being realistic, Princess Ineli.”

“Baton, you twit.” Even though she scowled at him, Ineli couldn’t help but giggle. “It is because we are dealing with my father that who knows what will become of his thoughts. Isn’t that right, your highness?”

Afterwards, Orba conversed here and there with those who came to greet him. As the only one of the senior statesmen present, Fedom was just as busy as the prince. So it fell on Dinn the page to constantly whispering the names of those who greeted the prince into Orba's ear in his stead. It was by all means, an endless task.

Before long, they were alerted of His Imperial Majesty’s grand entrance. Emperor Guhl Mephius, along with Empress Melissa, made their appearance. Guhl gave a short glimpse at the prince. He might have done so now, but wouldn’t even meet his eyes at the time of the ritual at the Dragon God Shrine.

“Gil. You appear to have improved considerably.”

“I have.”

That was everything to the father-son exchange.

"Has your face not thinned?"

The remark had come from obligation as the empress, her face no longer hidden.

She was approaching the end of her thirties, yet her attire and features slightly resembled that of a young girl; lined up against Ineli, they could be seen as nothing but a pair of sisters.

"To take part in battle is not the only role that men of the imperial family hold. Like your father, you must constantly keep a watchful eye and throw your chest out. Is that not right, your majesty?"

The emperor only slightly raised his brows.

Once the party had started and the countries' envoys were invited to join in the ceremonies commemorating the founding of Mephius, they began to offer their greetings. Naturally, there were envoys visiting as guests from Ende and Garbera, Arion from the east, and to the north—the group of city-states along the gulf coasts making up Zonga, and the lone islands such as Balor found further to the south.

And to each, their own specialities, forming large piles of clothes, spices, condiments, bizarre musical instruments, designed furniture of varying sizes, armours decorated with jewels; amongst them, what caught Orba's eye was a Garberan envoy.

The man who had introduced himself as Noue Salzantes seemed past his twenties. He had deep black hair and almond eyes that held a strange charm. In terms of appearances, he could be compared to Shique in handsomeness.

As a Garberan, he should have harboured some ill feelings towards the prince, but Noue offered his greetings while smiling without batting an eye.

"On behalf of the king, Ainn Owell, I offer his apologies for the hardships the subjugation of Ryucown may have caused your Highness. We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude for Mephius' assistance. The people of Garbera will never forget the kind deed and camaraderie you have shown us."

Orba stared fixedly at Noue's eyes. He was truly fit to be a civil servant, and did not look to be one who would personally wield a sword. With these thoughts, Orba's interest in him faded.

More noteworthy was the gift Garbera presented to the prince, consisting of three of Garbera's airships, that caught his interest. He was already in the middle of organizing an airship squadron from the few capable in the Imperial Guards. The airship itself had fighting potential, but above all, held great value in being used as a

messenger in a battlefield. He gratefully welcomed the gift, which he had hoped to get his hands on as soon as possible.

After that, Noue also expressed his salutations toward Princess Vileena. They were acquainted. The Salzantes House was one of Garbera's distinguished families. Moreover, Noue was recognized for his wisdom.

"It has been a while since we last met, Princess. You can be rest assured of the stagnant state of affairs."

"Is father in good health? And what of grandfather?"

"Yes, they are," Noue made a smile bordering that of guileless innocence. "It is the talk of the palace that the princess had issued an appeal towards the soldiers in Zaim Fortress."

Vileena turned red. According to Noue, her father, in a strained laugh mixed with grief had said,

"From the start, she was never a person to sit down quietly and do nothing regardless of place."

And her grandfather had said, "same as always," with an openhearted laugh. "Even as she lived alone in my estate, in the coming day, the princess would be up to her usual mischief, and then suddenly disappear again, to have rescued a child from a burning house with an airship, and day after day, gossip of her venture would jump all around back to here. And as I thought she was just about ready to come of age and be fit for marriage, from far away, past the country borders, I hear of such news. If such talk of the princess has not died down, then this old me also cannot yet allow myself to be assaulted with illusions of the tiny Vileena running all 'round."

Vileena covered her eyes.

"Is that so…"

Vileena muttered, as her lips moved to form nothing less of a smile. Gripped with an undeniable yearning, her eyes became teary. Having heard the words of her loved ones, even if it was second hand, she could not help but long to be near them. She had been here nowhere to the extent of years, but thoughts of how she had come to be so far away began to be made anew.

Once the delegation of introductions, which had lasted for some time, was over, the festivities began. It was a sword dance. One of Mephius' trademarks, several swordsmen were singled out and chosen to dance with a real sword.

“Look, that is the Clovis contender, Pashir.”

“Those are some amazing muscles. I want to sleep with those big, strong arms wrapped around me, if not even once!”

“Who do you intend to place your bet on, milord?”

The sword-dance performed on the eve of the festival involved the selection of participants in the gladiator tournament. The nobles would witness their sword dance in person, and place their bets on who could seize the same position Clovis or his aide Felipe held, as a form of side entertainment.

Pashir was also a name Orba had heard of. His eyes followed the nobles’ pointing fingers, and instantly,

Ooh.

He let out a gasp of surprise when Pashir the gladiator looked directly at him. With a massive body, he was certainly an unyielding gladiator. With deep black hair and a moustache, his whole body teemed with energy. He immediately looked away. Was it by chance that he had looked his way? At the very least, the gaze he held was not one that held respect towards the nobles.

Finally, with the loud beat of a drum, all twelve members began their sword dance.

They formed a circle and pointed their swords to the centre in unison, and then kicked off in all directions. They trod their steps, and just as the man on the right appeared to be struck overhead by a sword, the man to the left parried the blow before his chest. With their feet, they swung only with their full strength across the air, each clash occurring with precise timing that produced a steady rhythm; and as the drum beat louder and faster, the clashes gave chase.

And soon enough, they looked throughout the hall for those possessing high skills, and on discovery, would provocatively swing their sword. This too, was a kind of custom, where the provoked could join in on the sword dance. The women dressed in light garments would take in hand the respectfully offered swords, and enter into a new ring containing several swordsmen. The clattering of the weapons had further made it rowdy, where a single mistake in their pacing could result in the loss of a life, but the atmosphere produced by the blades had unwittingly drawn people in.

Before long, the aforementioned Pashir had separated from his dancing circle. Roaming the spacious hall, he began his search for people to provoke.

“Come to me, oh respected swordsman.”

"No, come to me!"

The soldiers who took pride in their skill and the young nobles shouted out. In an air of arrogance, Pashir passed by each of the men in turn, and then stopped his feet.

A faint commotion was raised, as the inquisitive eyes all focused on one spot. He stood directly before Prince Gil. Pashir directed a single, quiet glance towards him, but the violent passions hidden between those confronting pair of eyes had caught Orba's attention. He was without a doubt, a man in his thirties. Of course, he was also experienced.

Oh?

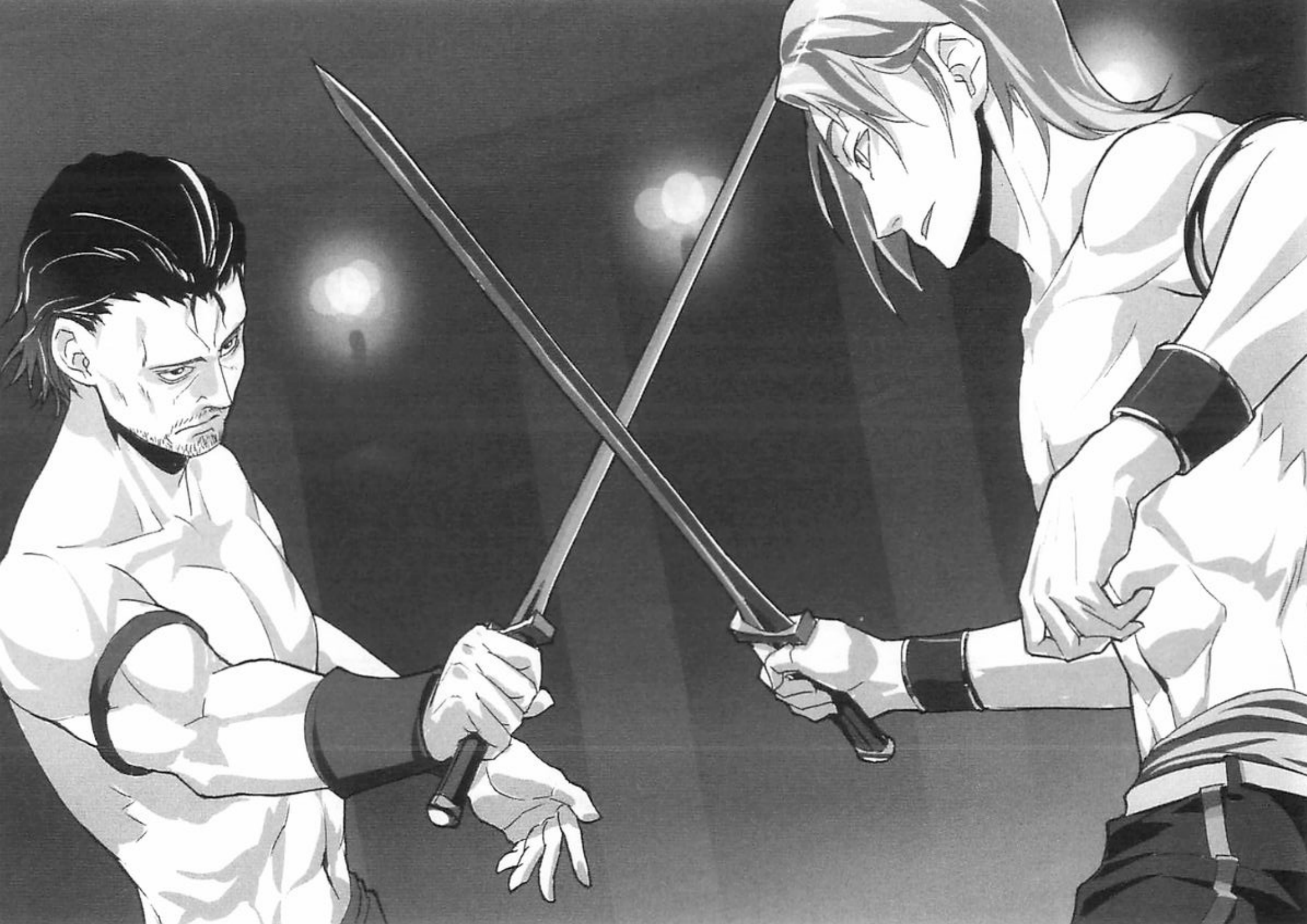
A heated sensation welled up within Orba's body and crossed his head. He was throbbing with resentment for being holed up in the room for so long. And also flowing out, was resentment at the continuous unaccustomed battles. The desire to take part in a real battle pushed its way out.

But he certainly could not brandish a sword in such a situation. Having received such a hesitant reply, Pashir's face filled with scorn. Orba's blood raged through his head.

"Your highness, leave this to me."

From behind him, Shique stepped forward. He had read Orba's feelings from behind. Orba was inflicted with a light feeling of bashfulness, but it would be foolish beyond a doubt to reveal his true character here. As the emperor had, he calmly nodded. It was not considered disgraceful to send a proxy in your place, if you were invited into a sword dance.

The hall erupted. Shique, at first glance, had a beautiful face that could be mistaken for that of a girl's. The combination of him and the boorish Pashir was a sight to behold. With a smooth motion, Shique nimbly drew the sword from his waist, and lined his sword against the tip of Pashir's sword.



They started off slow. Both cautiously and slowly let their swords meet, but eventually, they judged the other as an opponent of worthy skill and immediately increased their speed. As if they had settled their starting warm-up rally, they began to display movements no less inferior to those of the other sword dances..

Once Shique turned to the right, Pashir would move to the left. Pashir bent his back and readied to swing his sword, and Shique, familiar with this move, drew a large, showy arc that collided with his blow. Pashir quickly pulled back the sword he had just swung. The opponent kept sending out an unceasing, daggering look. Shique pretended to switch to defence and then commenced an attack sweeping towards Pashir's feet.

Pashir deflected the attack, as if he had anticipated the move, quickly switching back to the offensive. Neither were stuck on offence or defence. Offence was defence. Defence was offence; it was no doubt the ideal swordplay.

Orba opened his eyes in wonder. He could tell they were both serious. Serious, meaning there was no hesitation in killing the other party.

There were several instances where lives had been lost from a sword dance, and in most cases, the assailant was not charged. It was accepted as a formality, and the shed blood would be offered to fulfil the prayers for an abundant harvest.

After several rallies, the sound from the drum came to a dead stop, and simultaneously, the two swords engaged in mid-air also came to a stop.

The centre hall burst into unstinted applause. As Shique wiped off his sweat, he responded to the acclamations with a smiling face.

“That was pretty good.”

Orba said to Shique, who had come back to his side. Judging the comment went both ways, Shique shook his head.

“Look at that, he isn’t even sweating. He hasn’t gotten serious yet. ‘Strong-armed Pashir’. I’ve heard of his name, but to think he was this good.”

“And you also weren’t wielding your prided dual swords.”

Though he said so, Orba marvelled at Pashir’s skill. The aching in his blood had grown since before. But he was no longer a sword-slave. He held no obligation towards others, nor could he be forced to kill others out of duty.

"He's very talented, but I doubt Tarkas would really want him," Gowen said in a low voice.

"Why wouldn't he?"

"He's certainly strong. Strong, but plain," Gowen readily concluded. "He won't excite the crowds. That's right, Orba. You're also like that."

Orba nonchalantly shrugged his shoulders. As he was troubled by his heated blood, he failed to notice Noue Salzantes attentively watching him.

Soon after, the party in the inner palace met its end. However, the nobles, officers, and particularly the young couples prepared to set out to town, as if to say the real festival was only just beginning. They were already in a festive mood for the festival that would begin tomorrow. From amongst them,

"Things have become interesting."

More exultant than anyone was Fedom Aulin, who had invited himself to the prince's room.

"What could be so interesting. Did you see your own face as you were being borne through a mirror or something?"

"The situation with Zaat Quark. The head of the anti-imperial faction was forcibly placed under house arrest. This will surely create a commotion."

It must have been something big, for him to ignore Orba's retort..

"And there's also the situation with Kaiser. The misgivings towards the emperor will grow stronger and stronger. There is a possibility danger might also befall the crown prince. I'll have you act as a body double a while longer."

Tch. Fuckin' grazing the issue.

Fedom had just forcibly tied the knot on the unnatural absence of the real prince. Orba just barely restrained himself from mentioning the occurrence with the 'right of the first night'. He did not have enough information. Fedom was no friend he could confide in.

"You did well today in front of his majesty and his chief retainers. No one would have thought you were a gladiator. It seems this was the better of results."

"You resemble Tarkas."

"What do you mean?"

Orba turned the other way, without offering a response. In his good humour, Orba immediately moved on to talk of others.

"Is the news that Kaiser will be executed true?"

"I don't know. It depends on how his majesty feels. That is not something of your concern."

"Can't you somehow mediate for him and get him out?"

"What?" Fedom stared at Orba with startled eyes, short of any good humour. "When I said to 'behave like the prince' I did not mean to '*be* the prince'. Keep your head out of politics. I don't know what ideas you were given, but you better get rid of them immediately. Or better yet, focus only on the things you were assigned to."

Afterwards, Fedom hurriedly returned to his residence within the palace and called out the name 'Hermann' at the entrance, as if he had no spare time to even tidy the dirt off his shoes. Hermann was a magician that looked after and lived in the same manor as Fedom. However, a maid had rushed over to inform him that Hermann had been absent the past few days.

"Again?"

Fedom let out an irritated groan, but it wasn't a necessarily urgent matter. It was just what Hermann had said a few days ago that bothered him.

"Soon, without fail, a change in fate shall occur. You shall be without setback until then. You need only focus on preventing the double's true colours from being revealed, my liege. Currently, the prince's death has left a hole in the web of fate, and it's true form—the golden mean[3] so to speak, is in the midst of mending itself. To that end, a vast 'gale' will break out. The 'gale' will, without doing anything, swallow up a great many people. Please wait patiently for now. Amongst the countless that will be blown away from and vanish under the 'gale', my liege will ride along the 'gale' as a friend. So long as you wait, you will certainly be invited to join the 'gale' towards fate's destination."

He only wanted to get a clearer understanding of those prophetic words..

[3] The desirable middle between two extremes, one of excess and the other of deficiency

In Mephius—or rather, in its sphere of civilization, it was rare for magicians to be employed by leading aristocrats. They were almost never seen in public. There were even fewer of them than the prized species of dragons, Geysers or Ma'Duks, though there were also cases such as Ende and Arion, where the officially accepted magicians took part in politics and commanded in battle. These two countries were special exceptions, having statesmen that succeeded the lineage of Magic King Zodias.

Particularly in Mephius, which prided in having the strong spirit of warriors, they prejudiced against those who wielded unfound powers. An example would be the historically well-known magician Garda, hailing from the western provinces of Tauran, whose customs were rather similar to that of Mephius. As a priest of the Ryuujin doctrines, he exercised free usage of black magic in ether, ruling over the former capital Zer Illias. Even now, mention of his name instilled fear.

Fedom never personally professed of Hermann. Three years ago, Hermann had unexpectedly visited Fedom who, strangely pleased with the fortune-telling he had performed, let him live a life void of destitution since then, only providing for him without knowing where he usually went.

He knew the true identity of Prince Gil, and thus could be considered an existence that acted as Fedom's Achilles heel, though Hermann himself was the one who originally foretold that a mere gladiator would be able to act as the prince's double. There was no harm in keeping him alive until Fedom had achieved his own ambitions.

And that future isn't too far away.

Naturally, such thoughts made him feel self-important. Even the words of his wife welcoming back her husband, fell on deaf ears. He gave a light nod, and then continued his thoughts within his burning red face.

Because the emperor is so foolish as to strengthen his authority at the end of a ten-year war, anti-imperialist sentiments have increased. The imprisonment of Kaiser Islan, and the placement of Zaat Quark under house arrest have only fuelled their flames.

It was the long awaited opportunity. Fedom had no intention of patiently waiting until the emperor, Guhl Mephius, personally stepped down from the throne. He may have been approaching the verge of old age, but as of yet was still in high spirits, and it was'nt guaranteed that he would select Gil Mephius the First as his heir.

Having seen the favour he held toward his second wife, Melissa, there was a possibility that Ineli would marry a distant relative of the Imperial House and her husband made successor to the throne.

If I can bring together the anti-imperial faction with this, I can move freely in the future.

Within the faction, there numbered many like Zaat, who were anti-emperor rather than anti-imperial, but it was not yet the time to call for change. The local populace aside, many in Mephius followed a conservative way of thinking. Fedom had assessed there was not enough momentum to dissolve the country's system at this instant.

They may not have been able to bring themselves to abandon the long standing history of the empire; however, the opportunity opened by the doubts raised on whether the emperor's actions were detrimental to the country's future would play crucial.

First, I must gain more allies. There is no problem with the prince's popularity. Rather, it would be convenient in the distant future to give off the impression that he is an imbecile. Most important is that I maintain a resolute will.

Boldly, but cautiously.

At times when pursuing large goals, taking a large gamble was also necessary. He had already placed his hand. It was a gamble where his and all his relatives' lives would be in danger should they discover he had set up a sword slave as the prince. He would ride the flow—this 'gale' as Hermann called it, and then quickly and keenly make his next move.

In spite of the late hour, Fedom prepared his wine and retired to his study. He wrote the various names of the lords in his notes, as he consumed the wine like it was water. His mind was clear, not the least bit drunk, but intoxicated with excitement, as he once more pictured how the future would play out.

Part 3

The bell on the Black Tower rang, signalling daybreak. It announced the beginning of Mephius' founding anniversary. Since last night, stands and stalls had been busily readied, and their abundant variety of banners and signs coloured the town. A single step into the streets was enough to be wrapped in the savoury aroma of grilled meat and fish, and the sweet, fragrant smell of cake and candy. Casks of wine were served all throughout town, and glasses were raised in toast early as the rising sun. The children tightly grasped the spending money their parents had handed them for this once in a year event and ran about through town, troubled as to how to spend their

money, and the girls, having dressed up for this very day, walked through the streets while spreading their gorgeous smiles.

The ten-year war with Garbera had come to an end. Unlike the miserly atmosphere that visited the festival until the most recent years, this year held a wealthy assortment of international programmes. Travellers from abroad were also seen in great numbers. Portraits of the soon-to-be bride, the Garberan princess Vileena, were decorated with garlands. giving off a peaceful atmosphere.

At noon, an extensive military parade began. The soldiers, clad in armour decorated with precious stones and flowers, marched heroically as they hoisted their glimmering swords and spears up high. Leading them was the man who had taken the seat of the hero Clovis the previous year. The man, saddled on a white horse and proudly wearing a golden helmet, was a gladiator that did not hold the title of a slave[4]. He had participated in the deadly arena only to ward off starvation for his family, but through last year's championship had been officially employed as a Mephius soldier and currently worked as a corporal directly under Odyne Lorgo.

On the final day of the festival, a naval review alongside a parade employing air carriers would take place to the people's enjoyment. But for now, they would anticipate the event in the near future.

"C'mon, let's hurry."

"There're already people that have been lining up since last night. I hope there'll be seats."

The people were waiting in line at Solon's grand stadium, which would be transformed into the world's greatest arena ring for this one week.

Not missing this occasion, Orba's figure could also be seen in the grand stadium. Following the parade, the nobles gathered together on the Solon palace balcony, where they held a short ceremony immediately after.

It sure is big.

Below him, a great number of arena bouts were being held. Sword matches, spear matches, mounted horse battles, and even mounted dragon battles took place, and in a corner near the walls was a separate division, where the single-shot quick draw matches were held.

[4] Person that freely becomes a gladiator, as opposed to sword-slaves who are forced to become gladiators(e.g. for committing a crime)

There were many arenas in Solon, and Orba had personally fought at the amphitheatre in the city of Ba Roux. But even accounting for that, this stadium was by far the largest of all the places he'd been to. Apart from its immense size, Solon's specialty, the tank restaurant, would also be held in the evening hours.

The number of guests it could accommodate slightly exceeded fifty thousand. Even with those numbers, it neared a full house since the first day, and only in the area where Orba was seated was there much legroom. Supported by pillars that connected to the ceiling, a purple curtain spread across the front where the figures of guards stood out. It was an area exclusive to the imperial family and nobles, and it was there that Orba and Ineli sat, lined up against each other. Baton, Troa, and a few others were also present.

"The same thing always goes on in the matches," Baton complained, although he had accepted Ineli's invitation. "It's only good on the last day."

'Clovis' and Felipe's dragon slaying' event would be held on the last day, and practically all the imperials and nobles would be attending. It was no normal gladiator match, but one of the important ceremonies commemorating the founding of the nation.

Ineli lightly admonished him with a "You twit."

"This is on a completely different scale from the usual. All the well-known gladiators from within Mephius will be gathered together in one setting. —Ahhh, it's hot. Fan me harder, will you?" Ineli commanded the servant charged with caring for the guests in the boxed seats.

In response, a different slave girl brought a cold drink over. Looking at her, she was still in her younger years. Her dark skin somehow provided for a refreshing appearance. He unintentionally gazed at the girl leaving, when Ineli suddenly pinched his knee.

"_"

"Does His Highness the Crown Prince fancy those sorts of slave girls I wonder? You used to fawn over my maid, Lisa back then. So you like the types that are easy to understand."

"That's not it."

Having been invited, Orba stared down at the fights below, but somehow experienced a sense of unrest. Sitting in the seating area exclusively reserved for

nobles and looking down at the arena matches like this, he was afflicted with a pang of guilt. In his mind he clicked his tongue.

How long will I be troubled by these feelings of a slave? If I can't cut them off in places like these, I'll trip up and expose myself one day.

Just now, a cage holding slaves was brought out. Another cage was brought out from the gate on the opposite side, but contained within were several small-sized Faye dragons. Their distinctive features were their six legs and flattened snouts that looked like they had been squashed by a hand. Most notable were the two curved tusks that protruded from above their mouth.

Both cages were flung open. The dragons simultaneously jumped out, mouths foaming. The slaves also escaped in one go. The majority of them were half-naked women. The Faye's jumping power were tremendous. One of them immediately caught up with its prey and pushed her down. The Faye bore its fangs.

Orba instinctively clenched his fists. Ineli covered her mouth as she screamed, but her eyes glimmered, excitedly anticipating the bloodshed to come. Then, several gladiators rushed out from a newly opened gate.

It seemed to be a game where 'The strong Mephian gladiators rescue the sacrificial pagan girls in distress' where they, relying on naught but a lone sword, would challenge the Faye.

They may have been small-sized dragons, but the length of a grown Faye could well hit three metres. And as wild Faye, they formed groups and attacked with a ferocity comparable to even that of a large dragon, felling many of the gladiators. In the midst of this, cries of "Pashir! Pashir!" rang across the stadium.

The rumoured top-pick contender for Clovis' seat. Unsurprisingly, he displayed movement far superior to the rest. A Faye leapt towards him and he sliced horizontally against the incoming dragon, and then immediately jumped up on it and thrust his sword aiming for its soft neck. And as he desperately fought for his life, he also hurled instructions towards his allies. He had them form pairs of two, and as one distracted the Faye's movement, the other would seize the chance to leap in from behind. This strategy yielded them great results.

The maiden escaped in a bloody frenzy and dashed in Orba's direction. She attempted to cling to the paling, but even the foremost seats were situated considerably higher than her reach. The soldiers guarding the seating location once again waved their bayonets in an attempt to drive her off.

"Help! Please, help me!!"

Behind her, a Faye was hot on her heels. The woman's maddening scream pierced Orba's ears. Realizing this, Pashir gave high chase. Wielding his sword, he swung at the Faye, but the sword snapped off mid-strike, possibly because of it being overworn or poorly made. Still, he did not lose heart and clung onto the Faye by wrapping himself around its neck. The Faye struggled furiously, frantically trying to ram its tusks into the tender flesh before its eyes. Finally, it managed to tear Pashir off. The dragon swooped down on the maiden, who still clung to the paling.

"Pashir!"

At this time, Orba exceeded the limits of his patience. Beside Ineli who, taken aback, looked up at him, he pulled a sword out of a guard's waist and threw it with all his strength.

The sword deeply pierced the ground between the girl and the Faye. Pashir quickly plucked it out and sent a sharp blow towards the Faye's face, pursuing the wild animal without a moment's hesitation. Shortly after, a large spurt of blood flew out from the dragon's neck.

All six released Fayes were finished off. However, that did not mean the fight was over. They had to fight to the last survivor alongside the corpses of the fallen women and dragons.

They may have temporarily put in a joint effort to rescue the women, but they never intended to show each other any mercy. It was a battle where each and every one of them fought to live another day. The swords flashed here and there, and each time, another life was lost.

In the end, Pashir and one other gladiator remained. Both breathed heavily. Their bodies were covered in blood and sweat, each sustaining wounds big and small.

Orba looked on as Pashir moved to his right, and the opponent to his left. As they gradually closed their distance, the opponent thrust once, then twice, but Pashir brushed off all attacks. Seeing Pashir was not switching to offense, the man swung more widely, and in that instant, Pashir applied a lightning fast thrust. It appeared to be aimed at the chest, but was actually used to trip his opponent's feet. His right leg went flying into the air. And faster than the leg could touch the ground, Pashir delivered the finishing blow. There were no wasted movements. Skin unexpectedly hard as armour. Nimble movement. And above all, he was well versed in controlling the flow of a fight.

"Have you taken a liking to him? Is it not in bad taste to have taken a liking to someone so close to a slave?" Ineli said as she peeked at him with a side glance.

"It'd be a shame to let him die here."

"Really? He may be strong, but he has no beauty. He especially has no popularity with the female crowd."

After forming a smile with a strange fawning look in her eyes she asked, "Hey, brother. I have a favour I'd like to ask."

"What is it?"

"It's about Orba. I was wondering, could you have him participate in the gladiator games?"

"Why?"

Orba drew back in surprise as she asked him.

"Don't you think the participation of the hero who defeated Ryucown would make it far more exciting than any normal year up til' now? Please? I'd like to see him fight again in person."

"He's my Imperial Guard you know. Is it even possible to get him into the games now?"

"That's why I'm begging you. Could you comply with Ineli's request?"

She said, doing nothing but snuggling up close to his shoulders. In that gaze, Orba saw a calculating look fully aware he would not refuse. He winced, and faster than he could offer a reply, a figure came running over to him. The one panting and on his knees was Dinn.

"Brother?"

"Something important's come up. I need to return to the palace."

"Ehhh?"

"Ahh, the matter with Orba. I'll let you meet him later. Please be content with that. Then, I'll see you later."

Restlessly, Orba quickly departed.

Ineli was left flabbergasted, and soon her face flushed red as she stuck out her tongue at the fading back of Gil Mephius.

And another person was looking up from the stadium at that very same back. It was Pashir.

The girl who had previously carried over the drink to the seated area where the prince was located, was wiping off the sweat and blood off his skin with a cloth.

“Mira,” he called out the girl’s name.

“Yes?”

“Was the one who threw the sword the prince?”

“Yes.” Mira’s face, having had her name called out, was dyed in embarrassment. “It happened so fast and completely surprised me.”

“I see.”

Pashir, even now, stared motionlessly at the sword in his hand. The timing at which he had thrown it, the speed, and the very place it struck, was done with outstanding precision.

It took Orba half an hour to return to the palace.

War, who was waiting in the antechamber, stood straight up and greeted him.

War was a former gladiator. He was a man past his forties, and long past his prime as a swordsman. Neither his skill nor his appearance was particularly worthy of praise. Despite having been in the Tarkas Gladiatorial Group for slightly over a year, he was nothing more than an ordinary sword-slave, other than one seemingly blessed with good fortune at having survived ten years as a sword-slave.

In a way, that’s a skill in itself.

Orba thought, as he looked at him. Nothing about him really stood out and his only achievement deserving of merit was him having survived. Accumulated in his years, he was by no means narrow-minded.

After the battle at Zaim Fortress, the majority of the sword-slaves belonging to the Tarkas Gladiatorial Group had chosen to remain enlisted as the prince’s imperial guards. War had also been one of those who chose to remain, but Orba took him off the Imperial Guards and instead gave him a different mission.

"How did it go?"

Orba offered War a cup of wine. War respectfully picked it up, and as Orba waited for War to drain the contents,

“Did you find anything out?”

Orba asked, doing his best to feign normalcy, despite his heart having been beating furiously since his departure from the arena.

There were twelve Mephian generals. Excluding the three that handled the dragonstone ships comprising the air fleet, all of the other nine generals were performing wide-scale recruitment of mercenaries. The end of the ten-year war with Garbera had more or less reduced the size of their forces, but in a warring society, the admissions booth was always open.

He had commanded War to become one of those mercenaries. He would enlist into the mercenary corps belonging to none other than Oubary Bilan.

“What I know is no more than the common soldier, and at best can only be considered the talking gossip of the lower officials.”

“Ah, I don’t mind. Speak.”

Oubary led the Black-Armoured Division that burned down Orba’s village. Because it had happened six to seven years ago, there was no telling how many soldiers remained behind in the same position. A considerable amount should have died in the war with Garbera. Even so, there was a high likelihood that there was someone who knew of what happened at that time. To go investigate the happening and report back to Orba was what War had been commanded to do.

“There is a man who goes by the name of Bane and has maintained his rank as captain for the past six years. Bane has long served the general, but one of Bane's subordinates, somehow dissatisfied with this treatment, voiced his complaints in a cheap tavern I often go to. On one occasion, when he was drunk, I exchanged cups of wine with him so as to become better acquainted. I may not look it, but I make a good listener. I listened to his complaints without a single look of displeasure or reluctance and left a rather favourable impression. I've yet to meet him beyond that once, but before long I will be able to pry into more personal matters. Oh, and also, I’m certain Bane was present at Apta Fortress. I am positive that was what I heard.”

Looking good.

There was progress. And what was more, big progress. Orba struggled to restrain his desire to jump up and clap in joy. Then he caught sight of War, who seemed to be somewhat hesitating, as if there was something else to mention.

"What is it? If there's something else you've found out, no matter how trivial, say it."

Orba urged him another drink, and the slightly ashamed War shrank his shoulders back. He then proceeded,

"I'm not sure if this has anything in relation to the prince, but there was a remark that Bane accidentally blurted out that I found worrying. I had overheard a conversation between some of the upper members by chance, and according to what I had heard, General Oubary will be dining together with the man from Garbera known as Noue Salzantes in the near future. Bane found it strange and puzzling, because if he had to say it, Oubary would be on the side opposing peace negotiations with Garbera."

Noue and Oubary?

This was certainly an unusual fact. Orba, after doing nothing but slipping more money into War's hands, temporarily left the room.

This is doubtlessly no public meeting. Anyone could tell that these two meeting together is weird. That's why when you don't hide it, even the soldiers will talk about it.

However, that was the undeniable premise that led to the conversation.

If that's the case, then the dining location won't be at the Bilan Estate. It will be somewhere inconspicuous, and yet also be a restaurant with a bar room that nobles can use—there won't be many that fit this description. Noue will be in Solon for, at most, a week until the festival ends. This is the perfect time to cast a net."

"Your highness, your highness. What are you thinking of?"

Not catching Dinn's words, Orba silently mulled over his thoughts. Something strange worried him. He recalled the speech Noue had delivered without hesitation in front of Prince Gil and his smiling face. There was nothing objectionable of him as an envoy. It was because he was so faultless that Orba had lost interest in him at that time. However, upon hearing news that Noue might be secretly meeting with Oubary, Orba now found his behaviour worrying. To put it simply, he himself had failed to catch interest in Noue.

I don't like this.

And, he began to think this could perhaps become a means by which he could seize Oubary by the neck.

Orba immediately ordered Dinn to relay a message to the Imperial Guards' living quarters. Several minutes later, his own personal guards lined up in the room. All of them were his acquaintances, but donning his guise as Prince Gil, he handed down his orders.

Chapter 3: Her Royal Highness' Gladiator

Part 1

The following day and the day after that, Orba refused all invitations from Ineli and Rogue Saian.

He secluded himself in his room, where the work he did amounted to—nothing.

He loitered alone in his room. The main section of his room was far larger than the quarters he had stayed in when he was a sword-slave. Several times larger. The balcony that extended from his room also served as a garden. But going there would allow himself to be seen and he wanted to avoid raising questions as to why he was not sick. That was why he walked within the room.

On the first day, and the second day as well, Orba paced around as if a beast prowling in search of game. Each passing second felt long. Even his meals were carried out in silence. And whenever some faint noise was made, he would immediately direct his eyes at the door, to find that it never opened. By the second day, a shadow of impatience flared across his face. The sky outside the window was already dimming. Just as he had given up hope, a lone messenger came running into the room.

He's here.

Orba's feet ground to a halt. As Dinn began to call out to Orba, he caught sight of Orba's visage and held his breath. Orba's eyes tore straight up, and his lips curled upwards to reveal his canine teeth. It was a terrifying appearance rivalling that of his mask.

With the information he received from the messenger, Orba handed down new orders. They were to be deployed to the entrances of the palace and main buildings, and also throughout town serving as intermediary points, similar to information relay, and provide for two-way transmission of intelligence.

The location was two alleys down from the main road, in a ryotei[5] at the very end of a street lined with brothels.

In short, Noue had not shown up personally. The one Oubary dined with was his messenger. The location was a private room situated on the third floor. Any person in the store wishing to enter had to, without exception, ring the bell and obtain permission. It was ideal for confidential talks.

Orba first had several sword-slaves infiltrate the store. Naturally, he had handed them money and prepared them in the appropriate attire. After drinking several glasses of wine, they started an uproar at the set time. They even dragged the people in the store into the fight, though they took care not to create a bigger commotion than necessary, and then immediately vacated the store. In that time, the light-footed gladiator Aeson climbed over the fencings and walls and aligned himself against the balcony of the room Oubary was situated in. Aeson was a pirate born in the northern Zongan seas and experienced in climbing up and down the mast.

He stealthily listened in on the middle of the conversation without making a sound. The meet lasted approximately thirty minutes. What Aeson could make out was no more than the mere five minutes at the end. Still, there was some harvest. About the same time as the two finished their meet, Aeson got off the balcony.

Roughly three hours since the first report from the messenger, Orba heard the report from Aeson.

"—I see. Not a word of this to anyone."

"I understand."

Unaccustomed to this manner of address, Orba called out once more to Aeson, about to leave with the compensation money in his hands. "Sir?" he responded, turning around to find a gun pointed at him. Aeson turned stiff.

"I'll say this one more time, just to be clear. Not a word to *anyone*."

"Y-Yes, sir."

[5] A traditional Japanese restaurant, commonly used to hold discreet talks and catered to the higher class.

"No drinking during the festival. No leaving Solon. You don't know where my eyes and my ears lie. In exchange, if you keep to it until the festival ends, I'll give you the same amount of money as I did now."

A joyful countenance formed across his pale face, and he responded, "Sir!"

"...What's this all about?"

Dinn said after Aeson took his leave, his face also drained of colour.

"Nothing is clear right now and anything is still possible."

"B-But, this doesn't make any sense. General Oubary is a general long serving Mephius. Besides, he doesn't want peace with Garbera. The princess…couldn't have possibly come here from the beginning with this purpose, but then—Mmpphhmmfuu."

With a plate of grapes stuffed into his mouth, Dinn was for the meantime preoccupied with chewing.

"I said nothing's clear yet. We only have pieces of information after all."

Even as Orba calmly said so, his heart raged turbulently.

The contents of the conversation Aeson heard were as followed:

"The incident with Kaiser was truly fortunate. It appears to have spurred on Zaat's incitement. But I would never have thought this situation would arrive so soon. Rather, because the matter with Kaiser exists, Noue will not have to work for his accomplishments, is that not so?"

"It is as you say," the messenger replied. "Lord Noue is steadily progressing with his preparations. Zaat Quark, and the setting fire to the slaves' room as well, all proceedings are coming along."

"And amongst the proceedings, I should also be accounted for, am I not?"

"For the general's cooperation…"

"That's far enough. The thanking will come after everything has ended. It's fine to leave the handling of the matter regarding Zaat to me, but the situation with the slaves worries me. That man called Pashir. We seem to have gained his cooperation,

but he is participating in the gladiator tournament after all. Were he to lose his life, won't this be for naught?"

"There is no need to worry. The fire is already smouldering within Mephius. As it were, we are at best no more than ventilation. Even supposing Pashir were to lose his life, the already bursting flames will not be put out so easily."

"Already in Mephius, hmm. You are exactly right. To this end, the search will also determinedly be met within Mephius. Of course…so this was Noue's aim. The sword-slaves are an unfortunate bunch. They are the same as children provoked by wicked adults into fruitless opposition."

Oubary stifled a laugh.

"After this, there will be nothing to trouble the general. Your cooperation in the concealment of the instigator has also left Lord Noue marvelling at your bravery and ability to take action, General Oubary. I pray for a lasting relationship of camaraderie and trust amongst us that can cross beyond our countries."

"Hmph," Oubary snorted. Because his figure could not be seen, it was not possible to tell what emotions he held at the time.

"But what will you do with that princess of yours? If you move poorly, her life will be in danger."

"If only the princess were to escape ahead of time, Garbera's involvement will be suspected. It is not a matter of moving poorly—that would just be *how it ends up*."

"Ho," Oubary's voice quivered slightly.

It had been a short while. Then Oubary cleared his throat.

"—The hour is gone. Let us depart. To which banquet has Noue been invited this evening?"

"I believe it was called the Moonlight Palace. A great many envoys from numerous countries have been invited. If I remember correctly, Princess Vileena has also gone. Will the general also go there?"

"No, it's the opposite. I would rather not meet some strange faces. I shall ascertain Zaat's situation—"

He stood up from the seat and walked away from the room, barring any more of the speech from being heard.

Orba played back the conversation he heard from Aeson once more in his head.

His chest throbbed.

Oubary and Noue were scheming something outrageous during this festival. And to add, it was something big enough to shake the very core of the Mephius' foundation—no doubt about it.

Oubary is selling out his country, and Noue who should be promoting peace, is bringing trouble to Mephius.

He did not know what their common goal was. At the current phase, he could not even offer a guess. But two points were made clear in the conversation. The first was,

The princess' life is in danger—

Of course, the princess in this instance was Garbera's third princess, Vileena Owell.

And the other point was related to the keyword, Pashir. The Pashir that Orba knew of was the gladiator who was the top contender for the championship. Oubary had also mentioned he was 'participating in the tournament', so there was no mistaking it.

The names of these two people, at first glance, appeared to have no connection; but, it was clearly evident that these two were caught up in some plan that was, even now, steadily making way.

If it was something that would only simply bring troubles to Mephius, Orba might have even smiled upon it. He hated Mephius. If it meant burning the nobles in flames and causing them suffering agony, he would jump at the chance, even if by himself. However, if Oubary had to do with this, then that was a different matter. He would never go along with that bastard's wishes even once.

And also…

The image of platinum hair crossed his mind. And with it, a pure, extremely honest irritation.

Orba folded his arms as usual while deep in thought. Zaat, whom Oubary said he would go see. The Moonlight Palace, where Noue was said to have gone. Which one should he go for now? He wasn't going to bother with the pretence of directly asking questions. The information he held was too little. That was especially why he had chosen to meet *him* directly to try and shake him up.

"Dinn, prepare a change of clothes."

"Are you going out now? Where to?"

"The Moonlight Palace," Orba replied. He had for some reason said it in an embarrassed tone, having decided to go *there*.

"That place has a large number of envoys present," Dinn said, focusing on the task at hand. "Ummm, then formal attire suitable for a party…but if it's the prince who would do nothing but show off about his first campaign, then donning a military outfit would be—"

"A cuirass, sandals, and bangles."

Orba picked up the object he hid when guests were present. It was the mask of the Iron Tiger.

Dressed in clothing fit for a gladiator, Orba headed towards the Moonlight Palace alone.

The Moonlight Palace—its original name was 'The Palace of Moonlight facing the Dragon's Left Wing'. It neared the Imperial Dragon Eye Shrine, contained one of the most magnificent gardens found in Mephius, and was more than often used to host large parties.

The guard at the gate saw Orba's mask and bowed. He wasn't a man with much of a prominent character, but in accordance to the rules, performed an inspection for weapons and then granted permission for Orba to enter.

No sooner than he had entered the garden, all the men and women called out to him. The name and appearance of the gladiator said to have defeated Ryucown had become well-known. The nobles, as guests of the party hosted in this mansion that came second to their own, welcomed him.

It wasn't that they had never foreseen encountering a savage person until now, but Orba had become the talk of the crowd. For all the hard work he put in as the prince's body double, it was the least he could be rewarded.

As he headed further in, Orba came across the two princesses, Vileena and Ineli. He stared in wonder. The two were facing each other and chatting happily. And as they appeared to do so, open hostility could be seen within those two pairs of eyes.

Part 2

Vileena Owell burned with ambition. The prince, who she thought would finally rise out of bed on the festival eve, had immediately withdrawn back into his room. She would no longer depend on him.

As if I would depend on him. There's nothing to depend on!

She stood in front of a mirror fitting on her dress, and while Theresia busily arranged her hair, tightly clenched her fists.

"The prince's absence is actually convenient. I will assess the envoys from all the countries by myself, and strengthen connections with Garbera even as I stay here in Mephius. That's right, and I can also use this opportunity to remember the names and faces of the Mephian nobles. First, I'll have to find myself a new acquaintance, a close friend. If I don't establish my own foothold, I won't make any progress."

"Oh my. Princess, you're making a scary face," Theresia said, looking at the mirror. "If you're like that, then all the effort I put into preparing you as Mephius' best woman will come to nothing. You'll scare all the men away. Even that far-off prince would surely quake in fear in his room from seeing such a demonic face."

Ignoring Theresia's sarcastic remark, Vileena's violent emotions flared up even further.

That emperor's way of doing things...I don't like it.

Kaiser Islan's execution was said to be scheduled in a few days. Moreover, it was in the course of the gladiator tournament, where the masses could watch as he would be made out as live bait for the dragons. Having heard this, Vileena's skin crawled in disgust and horror.

Kaiser practically wasn't even given a chance to defend himself. At best, he had only expressed his opposition to the emperor's proposal to relocate the shrine and erect a new building in its place. If such things came to pass, even the country's management would spiral out of control.

'These men of high stature who know only to stare at their master's countenance in fear of incurring his anger are the ones participating in the country's politics—I would never think such a country would last this long in a warring society.' Grandfather would most certainly say such.

Vileena ascertained while in the midst of attending the hosted party held at the Moonlight Palace this evening. No matter how savage a country Mephius was, there should be those that could not ignore their feelings of opposition towards the emperor's conduct.

I will make sure of each and every one of their positions and views, and so that I may use it to somehow benefit Garbera, I must determine my own standing.

The party began exactly at sunset. In the halls and the garden, mountains of food and people were prepared and readied. And amongst the constant chattering and music being sounded, Vileena revealed herself to the finely dressed people of the party. To the Mephian nobles who called out to her, she started off with an affable smile.

"My, another beauty has joined us this lovely evening."

"The prided day for all Mephians will not be long to come. I pray with my heart that the wedding with the princess, praised as Garbera's white flower, will come even one day sooner."

"Dear me! What a charming princess. A well suited match for our crown prince."

Just keep smiling.

She struggled to prevent her emotions, which took the form of a venomous spider nested deep within her, from appearing on her face as she politely responded to each and every one of them. However, mention of the issue relating to Kaiser never came up. Vileena had also grown familiar with some of Mephius' customs, and so knew full well that the women far from preferred to stick their noses into politics.

If I can at least get someone from their side to broach the topic…

She understood that it was hard for them to bring mention of this topic with a foreign guest. Vileena bitterly regretted the ambiguous position she found herself in. Were Gil Mephius to have come here together with her, the circumstances might have been somewhat different. As she thought so, her fury towards the prince, and also towards his incompetence, grew even more.

She decided for a change in location. And if this topic came up somewhere along the way, she would attempt to join in.

Between the Moonlight Palace and Main Palace, a small, but strangely unusual forest stretched out and made the garden view much more enjoyable. In the centre of the garden was a water fountain where a flock of people gathered and were having a

friendly chat. And in the corner, a group of musicians took up their positions and produced a melodious symphony as they played their instruments. Couples, young and old, embraced each other and danced.

Oh? Vileena stopped her feet. She spotted Noue Salzantes. In Garbera's palace, he was a man popular amongst the young ladies and children, and it seemed to be similarly so in Mephius. He was showing a magnificent dance with one of the ladies, as the surrounding groups of women threw glares of jealousy and envy.

Once the dance ended, Noue came to realize Vileena's presence. He offered his greetings if not one second earlier, and for some reason quickly drew towards the direction of the party.

"Good day to you, elder sister[6]."

The one who flipped up her skirt and did a light curtsy was Ineli Mephius, Gil Mephius' stepsister and an imperial princess of Mephius.

Vileena remembered her innocent and yet charming appearance. And with it, the extremely rude comment Theresia had made, *"I wouldn't think she was only two years apart from Vileena-sama."*

"Ah, could it be I've yet to introduce myself to my elder sister? I hope you bear it no mind, as it is only a difference between fast and slow. I felt it would be better to exchange greetings as early as possible, for the both of us."

"Yes, I think so—Ow!—Yes, I couldn't agree more."

The 'ow' was because Theresia had elbowed her. It was a delicate situation in which they determined their relative standings, but right now, it was better to conduct herself with the standing of a guest. And also, Theresia had intuitively grasped that this girl Ineli was someone her mistress would not come to like.

"Just now, I have had the pleasure of entertaining a dance with Lord Salzantes, and as expected, Garbera has such refined characters. His dancing techniques and of course, his ability to escort a lady, are far superior to the likes of Mephius' men. Elder sister, say….will you not also entertain yourself to a dance? Surely, everyone present here will gladly come to arms."

[6] As with Gil, it is written as お義姉さま, meaning stepsister but pronounced onee-sama. Note: Ineli is actually older than Vileena. However, she addresses her as onee-sama as a form of respect, rather than one of seniority, so I will be using 'elder sister' henceforth.

"No, I will not. Dancing is one of my more inexperienced areas." Vileena smiled in modesty. "I have had the pleasure of witnessing this a moment ago, but Princess Ineli is extremely skilled. It is not in my place to participate."

"My, is that so. So that's how it is. Well, it's best not to fret over it. I have been taught by a dancing instructor since I was three. That instructor is a master dancer of the Arion imperial court. That person has been praised with having talent at the age of three."

"That's amaz—an amazing feat."

Before she knew it, a group of girls—most likely the daughters of distinguished nobles—had gathered around her.

"Really, Ineli-sama has been able to do anything since she was little."

"I've also been scolded by my father and mother, saying 'Why can't you be like Ineli-sama?' And I would think, 'There's no helping it! I'm not Ineli-sama!'"

The girls broke into boisterous laughter. Ineli beamed triumphantly at Vileena, who was made to continue her troubled smile. And,

"Oh, it's not as if even I can do everything. Doesn't everyone have their own strengths and weaknesses? Take for example...," smoothly changing the conversation, she directed her glowing eyes at Vileena, "For example, I can't ride airships."

"Airships?"

"Is not knowing how to ride an airship really something to be embarrassed about? Isn't that something used in the military? I've never seen one up close."

Ineli grinned in enjoyment at the other girls' confusion.

"I suppose you're right. That is, in a way, something that doesn't make you happy. I mean, think about it. Riding such a thing, and using it to fly in the sky—and then ending up scared and fainting. Wouldn't that embarass you?"

"Ah, you're right. Such a thing is improper for a lady."

"Forget about getting angry, we might even be disowned."

They laughed together. As Ineli showed her approval, she intently watched Vileena, whose eyes were screwed up.

Oh? Could this be...

Vileena could take a guess as to what this was. It was evident without needing this to proceed further. The other girls aside, Ineli was no doubt fully aware of it. This was about the immediate princess who had come from another country and her peerless ability to pilot an airship. And of how, in the battle at Zaim Fortress, she had soared through the battlefield with her own airship.

So that's what this is. She's picking a fight.

She forced herself to continue her smile while her mind boiled over repeatedly.

If she's going to pick a fight, I'll show her one. Now…how should I go about it—

"Is something wrong?" Ineli smiled sweetly at her. "Elder sister, have you changed your mind? Will you accept a dance?"

Vileena understood it now. Ineli seemed to have great confidence in that area of expertise. Even Vileena held some knowledge of dance. She was the princess of a country after all, and at the very least had a basic education in the etiquettes of being a lady.

Vileena pulled back the sleeves of her dress in confidence and raised her chin.

"If you insist to that extent, while it may be embarrassing, Vileena Owell shall entertain you a dance."

Oh really now.

Ineli, facing Vileena, chuckled within. Their surroundings also became heated. Noue, in a last ditch effort to help in this situation spoke up,

"Then I shall be the princess' partner—"

Ineli stopped him from speaking.

"No, I won't have that. You said you would continue to accompany Ineli as her partner all night long. You had promised so, did you not?

"Ah. Well, that is, but your imperial highness…."

Noue turned sour. In Garbera, he would instead be the one who led women by the nose; the one rumoured to cause tragic scenes to unfold between men and women. But here in the lands of a foreign country as a standing envoy, as expected, he could not refuse this princess.

At this point, a young noble quickly extended his hands towards the royal princess.

“Will her highness allow the unworthy me as her partner?”

The name of this man was Baton Cadmus. He was a man of significant stature, and in terms of appearance, was fit to act as the princess’ partner. Vileena would have been fine with anyone as her partner. As this princess took his hand, she failed to catch sight of Baton winking back at Ineli.

It was Ineli’s plan to have him slightly shame this princess from another country on this one occasion. Up to now in such showy events, she was the leading actress. She was sent for not only by tutors within Mephius, but also from those around the world of different varieties of styles, and was confident in her own sense of style. She was greatly knowledgeable in fashion, theme selection, dance, tea, a bit of esprit, painting, and music. All the girls Ineli’s age strived to be like her. And all the more so when her mother, Melissa, had become the empress and her status had been elevated to that of an imperial princess.

And suddenly intruding into her domain was Vileena. The Mephians were somehow rather weak to expressions of ‘cultural’ origin. Even though Garbera was until recently an enemy country, many Mephians could taste the refined flavour of their culture. Particularly, tales of Garbera’s chivalry, of how men would take up arms for their lady and risk their lives fighting for them, had garnered high popularity amongst the women and children.

During tea talks, the subject of their gossip would shift towards Vileena. And, whilst she stayed in the same country, her situation of being holed up in the women’s chambers was strangely exaggerated. Just today, they passed by each other and exchanged glances, and with the slightest of efforts Vileena caught the attention of her surroundings. The very thought of this sickened her.

I’ll knock her down a peg here.

She would put Vileena to shame, enough to overwhelm her, and then compassionately offer her a hand. If she could also make Garbera’s princess her follower, she could once more grasp the initiative in the women’s chambers as she had until now.

The tune of the Mephian waltz played and the dance began. Ineli and Noue both danced with equally fluid motions. Their breathing gradually synchronized, and sighs leaked out from the observing crowd.

On the other end, the aforementioned Vileena was suddenly swung around full force by Baton. She was perplexed by this dance, which had become one where both

her feet were prone to be lifted off the ground. In an attempt to match her partner's rushed movements, she stepped on Baton's foot. The two of them both lost their balance.

"Princess, the step here occurs much earlier."

Hearing the voices from his surroundings, Baton offered some advice. Stealthy giggles sneaked out from the surroundings.

"M-My apologies."

She accidentally spoke in male speech. Her face turned red in accordance. But she tripped many more times after that. Even as she made attempts to follow after Baton, there were absolutely no indications of him allowing her to do so. This time, he stumbled completely on his own feet and took a large stagger behind.

This man, he's doing it on purpose.

She met his eyes. There lay an arrogant smile.

Vileena grinned.

"Ah," Theresia had raised her voice as a warning, but she was too late. Baton once more stuck his feet to obstruct the princess' steps, and Vileena having preparedly anticipated this kicked his other foot up. And then using the rotation of her hips, she hurled the startled, hopping Baton.

Baton fell face first onto the floor. For a moment, the waltz came to a halt, as people gave out gasps of blameless surprise. Theresia covered her face on reflex.

"Anyone."

Vileena cast a challenging glare at the men. And she stretched out her right hand into the empty air.

"Is there anyone out there. This benevolent man is not suited to be my partner. Is there anyone out there, willing to show Garbera's princess a true Mephian waltz?"

"Ahahahahaha," Ineli laughed in a shrill voice over and over. Noue was also surprised, but with Ineli as his dance partner before him, he was unable to offer any assistance.

Vileena was surrounded in stares. Everyone cast down their eyes and turned their faces. There were also those who pretended to be actively engaged in idle talk. Even

as she cast her eyes through a full turn, there were no signs of reception. As she held back her anger, she could feel the startled reactions.

She had gone too far. With this, she would gain the hostility of the Mephius people. The supporters she had won over were nowhere to be seen. Each and every one of these people offered no response. They were not only afraid of incurring Ineli's disfavour, but above all, of being the target of Vileena's burning hostility.

She bit her pink lips. In her chest, she could feel her grandfather reprimand her.

That girl named Ineli. Could she have read my quick temper and predicting such an outcome, provoked me?

If that is so, it is my complete defeat. I acted exactly along her expectations.

But Vileena continued to hold her hand out in spite of that. She could not forgive that girl's temperament precisely because she had been led by the nose. As more time passed and passed, the realization of her miserable state dawned on her, and each slowly passing second began to feel like an hour. Her shoulder gradually tired, and that very hand that had failed to grasp anything lowered in vain.

Vileena herself lowered her head. From the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of Ineli's triumphant smirk.

"—Princess."

At that time, the figure of a person emerged from the crowd.

Vileena gasped, and also gasping in a difference sense of the meaning was Ineli.

"Princess, if it is fine with you, will you humble me—no, the unworthy me to a dance?"

With a bow, the one who raised his hands up high and donned a mask was the former gladiator.

Vileena, in her apprehensive state, raised her hand a second time and grasped the gladiator—the Imperial Guard's hand.

Orba's hand clumsily wrapped around her waist.

The two, mutually inclined towards the other, like a young boy and girl when they first hold hands, and falteringly tread their steps.

The dance flowed. The princess who had only just come from another country and the former gladiator who had defeated the enemy general at Zaim Fortress; attention focused on the two. Passion surrounded them, possibly amplified by the musical performance given by the virtuosos.

Orba paid discreet attention to his feet. He had never experienced this type of dance before. He carved the rhythm of the dance into his mind. A single offbeat, and he feared the whole dance would fall to pieces.

One, two, three….one, two.

Under his mask, a cold sweat firmly suspended itself on his brows. *Is this one round? No wait, there's a delay. Extend your hands, look away—and then again, one, two, three, one…*

"Orba."

"Huh?"

Made even more startled, Orba's voice rang out. He was really nervous. Vileena slipped out a giggle and said,

"Thank you."

Orba did not return any words. He himself wasn't even sure why he had volunteered himself before the princess.

Passion coloured the night, and in the midst of the melody of the waltz that flowed into the ears, he took the princess' hand and danced round and round. The night wind felt refreshing against his skin. The branches of the forest rustled and the fountain bathed in an attractive golden under the fire lights, as gentle smiles spread across the faces of the guests watching the scene unfold before them.

This one night. This one scene. Orba did not dream it.

Before long, the music stopped and the two hoisted there fastened hands up into the air. Cheers and applause echoed. The dance was clumsily executed, and yet it somehow touched their hearts. Their fastened hands separated and they each gave the other a courteous bow, during which Orba found himself overwhelmed by a wave of intense emotions.

Part 3

No sooner than when the dance had ended, Orba once again found himself surrounded by people.

"Orba-dono, will you allow us to hear the details of the time you defeated Ryucown?"

"Come here and let us have a drink together."

"Is it true that mask is the curse of a magician and can't be taken off?"

"What of the rumour that concealed behind that mask, is a noble of a ruined country?"

There's no end to them.

Orba resisted the urge to yell out "Shut up!" at them and conducted himself respectfully. Among them, many women tried to touch his body, causing him to jump up in response, which in turn invited their laughter.

Then, he felt a piercing gaze from a group of people on the opposite end. By chance, he glanced upon Ineli and saw an expression that could not be put into words. It wasn't quite anger or sadness, and although it neared being expressionless, just her gaze alone sent strong feelings of hostility.

When Orba's eyes met her own, Ineli's face dyed red, and then slowly paled, after which, she defiantly turned her back and immediately walked away. He caught sight of Baton chasing after her in a flurry out of the corner of his eye.

At long last, the end of the party arrived and Orba was freed from the persistent meddlesome guests. The couples that dispersed as fast as they formed, those that were headed to a different party, those who had drunk themselves unconscious and were being nursed by their servants, those discussing how they wanted to go sightsee the town festival, and—amongst these many people present, the target Noue had long left.

Tch. What was the point in coming here then?!

As he thought of returning, a woman in her older years emerged from the garden and called him to a stop. He thought it was another someone claiming to be the gladiator's fan, but on closer inspection, found the one bowing before him to be Vileena's head maid, Theresia.

"For helping to save the princess, I offer my most humble gratitude."

"….What do you mean?"

"Hoho. I see Orba-dono here is the type to save a maiden in distress. You seem well versed with the code of a Garberan knight."

"I'm a gladiator." Somewhat puzzled, Orba shook his head. "Lumping a gladiator together with a Garberan knight, you'll definitely invite resentment. Being a former slave and yet still having taken the princess' hand, instead, I should be the one begging for forgiveness."

Half of what he had said was self-derision, and the other half out of cynicism. It was possible for a person of high standing and a slave to talk as equals and hold hands together. However, the difference between that and reality was as big as the sky and the earth.

The whole time, Theresia raised the corner of her eye.

"The princess is not someone who would concern herself about whether or not a person is a slave. Of course, I as well. The princess would even scorn you for your self-abasement. Please bear this in mind."

That's because you don't know a slave.

He was about to begin his rebuke, but noticed the bunch of knocked over, empty wine cups on the table Theresia sat at. For the meantime, he sighed and courteously lowered his head. Then a sudden worry came to mind.

"Have you seen the princess?"

"Oh…" Theresia shrugged her shoulders with a troubled expression. "She firmly stated she wanted to take a stroll in the garden *alone*. Well, the security here is strict enough that she would be fine even if she was alone, but as you see she still hasn't returned and I've been waiting here all this time."

She presented him a glass, as if to ask, "would you join me?" but he refused with his hand.

"Did you forget something?"

Theresia asked, prompted by Orba who had proceeded to walk towards the garden.

"No."

Orba left after saying that one word.

He wandered about in the garden, and then made out the figure of someone perched on a slightly elevated hill and marched towards it.

It was a spot that oversaw the forest placed between the palace. The illuminated palace and on the opposite end in a partially depressed area of land, the town lights could be seen. The still expanding crowds of people flooded the festival uproar, and if he listened carefully, he could hear the town's bustling tumult carried by the winds.

Vileena was there. On the hilltop, her hands clung to a fence her height as she looked down at the townscape. Orba tried to call out her name, but why was it that his voice would not come out.

So small.

That was how he saw her. The face of this young girl faintly lit against the town lights was beautiful enough to immediately snap a person's head to attention, and yet currently displayed an unusual immaturity. The princess was fourteen years old. It was to be expected that she appeared small, but it was the first time Orba had viewed her this way.

A faint humming could be heard. It wasn't the same as the sound made from the Mephian waltz from before. It sounded like a Garberan tune. Even flying with an airship on end, how many days would it take to get to that distant, cut-off land from here.

The humming continued for some time, when Vileena suddenly stopped and turned around.

A swordsmen in silence in the dead of the night, his face concealed by a mask and standing behind her—it was certainly eerie, but Vileena did not utter a single sound, only staring slightly in surprise.

"About before..."

"It was nothing."

Again, he cut her off before she could offer her thanks. She was now at a loss as to what else to talk to him about. And possibly having found it, she smiled.

"You've been one since what happened at Zaim Fortress, haven't you? For one as a hero to be in such a place by himself isn't right. Why don't you go over there and have a toast with everyone?"

"The same goes for the princess. Being alone here is dangerous. Theresia-dono has been waiting for you. Let's go back together."

"Me? I am...that's right, I will be attending a date from hereon forth. With a fine gentleman might I add."

Vileena giggled at the startled expression Orba made.

Ah—

For some reason, Orba could feel his face flush behind his mask.

"It would be good if that were the case, but..." Vileena caught her hair that flickered in the night wind, and once more looked off into the distance.

"What kind of a person is the crown prince? Has he ever found someone he loves, and were they able to find happiness? I've never fallen in love. I've come to meet many people in Garbera; there are those that I've gotten close to, and those that are strict with me and yet guide me along, but of them, those I feel I can call true friends in the very sense of its meaning are fewer than I can count. That's how it is, even in the home town I was born and raised in. And as for Mephius…"

Vileena was unusually talkative, possibly owing to the night's darkness. Because her face could not be seen, she might have felt it permissible to lower her guard for now.

"No matter what kind of place it is, I thought I could continue as I always have. Grandfather also told me the same thing. I am unquestionably Vileena Owell. And it's not as if I've changed from how I was in the past. However…"

Vileena spoke in a far-off voice that could not be clearly made out. For a short time, there was silence.

"Orba. Have you ever spoken with the prince?" she asked him.

He gave it some thought and replied, "Yes." It would have seemed strange if he were not acquainted with the prince. Having done so, Vileena asked him a question that left him even more hard-pressed.

"For you, what kind of person do you see Prince Gil as?"

"Even if you ask me what kind of person he is..."

"It might be slightly shameful, but despite him being my fiancé, the times I have spoken with that man are fewer than I can count. Even now, there are too many things I don't know about him. If I could get to understand him ever slightly more, I could better fight my own battle here in the lands of this country."

Battle.

What Orba fought every day. Here in these lands, Vileena Owell was also fighting. Her extremely discouraged state was naturally, but not solely caused by Ineli and the others' ridicule. How she was fighting, the extent of her efforts, even this much wasn't beyond Orba's imagination. He himself was like that.

"I take it back. I asked something stupid. Forget I—"

"That prince is," Orba said as he hung his head. "….That prince is childish. Far more so than you. Extremely more so. Extremely."

"…"

"Even if he acts like he knows everything, really, there are lots of things he doesn't understand. That's why…you can probably guess this without me saying it, things of these sorts, it's better not to expect anything from him. All of his thoughts, he speaks them out regardless. And for what he doesn't know, if you don't teach it to him, he'll remain forever ignorant."

After his fast-talking ended, Orba grunted out, "That's all."

"Please excuse me. I'm a bad speaker. As for what I want to say, even I…"

"No, it's fine…..Ok, I get it now."

Vileena nodded her head.

"Then I shall try to put it in my own words. True, certainly, once the topic strays from himself, he knows almost nothing of others. This includes the people of Mephius."

"Yes."

"And—" Vileena's lips spread open. "I agree that the prince is childish. He follows a seemingly honest train of thought rivalled by his seemingly prudent simplicity. Occasionally, I can almost picture him as a newborn infant."

"What!?"

"Eh?"

"Ah, no, from far away, I thought I heard some jeers directed towards me."

He set off from the railing and cleared his throat, as he looked off into the distance.

"It's about time we go back. Theresia-dono is drinking way too much."

"I'm sure Theresia is rather happy to have a reason to drink," Vileena held back a chuckle.

"Well then, let us go. Theresia gets *scary* when drunk."

She hid her embarrassment at her base choice of words.

The two descended the slope and returned to the garden. Theresia hoisted her empty wine cup up into the air. The one who should have followed her lead, the page sitting at the table, lay head down fast asleep.

"Now then. Princess, shall we return to the women's chambers?"

"No—sorry Theresia, but there's a place I want to visit."

"Hm? The princess had hoped to covet much more of the festival to come, because I would buy and give you the many coloured balloons the next day. You would carry a whole bunch of them and most of all, enjoy running about with them outside, did you not?"

"Th-That was when I was a child." Vileena's face reddened. "I was thinking we should go and pay the sick prince a visit now."

"Huh?"

Theresia and Orba both said aloud.

"But Princess. The night is almost past. Even normally, the prince is not one who would kindly take to meeting you."

"Even if at some point in time it may be impossible, right now, here at this very moment, it is not. No matter if he continues to refuse me. Until I pluck him from his roots, I plan to show up no matter how many times it will take."

"Princess…"

Theresia said deeply moved, and beside her,

"T-Then, I'll take my leave. I just remembered an urgent matter. Ahh, I can't leave it like this,"

Muttering some half-baked excuse, Orba hurriedly made his leave before the two.

Even out on the roads, in the midst of the festival commotion, the horse-drawn carriages were by no means easily accessible. Left with no alternative, Orba ran and ran all the way back to the palace.

Shit! What does she want with the prince this time?

She might be coming to utter some sort of complaint again.

He hurried Dinn to quickly help him change his clothes, and just as he slipped into his bed, the sound of the bell resounded.

"Let them in."

Surprised by Orba's command, Dinn answered the door and let Vileena and Theresia enter the room.

"How might you be faring today?" Vileena questioned.

She looked somewhat disappointed. All the more so as she had stubbornly insisted on coming here without any notice.

"I seem to be feeling a little better."

Orba said, pretended to have a coughing fit. Theresia carefully examined his face.

"You're sweating so much. Your breathing is heavy; I can see you are absolutely *not* in good health. Princess, we should cut our visit short for today."

"N-No, it's fine. I'll only be here for a while."

She sat on the chair Dinn offered her, and stared at the prince who lay in bed.

Feeling the atmosphere somewhat unbearable,

"Is there something you want to say?"

"Well, why do you think so?"

"That's the impression I got."

"I only came here to see you. I was thinking you might be bored, being all alone during the festival and whatnot."

Orba drew a blank at her somewhat bizarre behaviour. He could not see her usual aggressive behaviour that would appear outwardly polite while she waited for the

opportunity to strike. He remembered the intimidating air that, normally, was brought about the moment she confronted him that made even he square off.

Either the princess changed or….

"Today was quite arduous for the princess. That person called Ineli, it would do good for the prince to exercise some caution against her…."

"Theresia. Stop it."

In the end, with only two or three harmless exchanges, Vileena immediately stood up from her seat.

"Well then. Please rest up. If you were to happen to have some appetite tomorrow, I will bring something over from the festival."

"And some of the princess' favourite balloons as well."

"The-re-si-a! You talk too much!"

While he ascertained her leaving back, he gave thought to his impressions.

It's not her.

He had chosen not to go to where Oubary or Zaat was, but to the Moonlight Palace. It was undeniable he had gone to meet with Noue face-to-face, but more than that, he wanted to meet with Vileena and ascertain her feelings.

The messenger dispatched by Noue had said they were indifferent to her life, but that may also have been a ploy designed to win Oubary over, or perhaps Vileena herself was made to participate in Garbera's plans, unaware her life was being targeted, but…

She's not taking part in it. She's too determined to pursue her own battle in Mephius.

She had raised the issue about Kaiser that time when he returned from the Saian residence, and absolutely would not approve of it. All the more proof she had established Mephius as her second home.

If it's not the princess', it's hard to imagine Garbera to be the one pulling the strings. Is it all Noue and Oubary's scheme?

Not realizing his own strange feelings of relief, new feelings sprang forth that Noue's plans must not come into fruition

If his motives were to be expressed into words, some things immediately came to mind. There were his feelings that did not want things to go Oubary's way, and also with the line provided by War, he had finally now caught hold of some clues related to Apta Fortress. And yet, if this country were to fall into chaos right here and now, he held apprehensions that he might lose hold of these clues. And, if Mephius were to collapse into ruins, he would lose the authority vested in the prince, whose role he had continued to work so hard to play, and in the end, return to being a gladiator with no power. Then he would not be able to realize a single one of his goals.

However, right now, far outweighing all those reasons,

To so easily throw away the life of a princess who so desperately threw herself into an unfamiliar country and is fighting her battle….what are they scheming?

Anger.

Anger towards those who unconcernedly attempt to manipulate the lives, the fates of others. The very anger he harboured when his village was burned down, that gave form to dark, viscous emotions.

Like I'll fuckin' let them.

Like I'll let a single fuckin' thing go according to those bastards' wishes.

Orba rose up from his bed like never before.

Away from the main building of the Mephian palace, in the outer palace stood a similarly small tower situated near ground level. There lay the allotted quarters for the foreign ambassadors to stay.

Looking up from the windows of one of these rooms at the palace, now illuminated in commemoration of the founding festival, was the Garberan envoy Noue Salzantes. Compared to his country's own buildings, the Mephian palace seemed almost rustic. But he was used to it. He had passed an upwards of five years charged as acting Deputy Chief in the Apta Fortress he had plundered from Mephius.

That fortress was currently undergoing salvage operations in preparation for its transfer to Mephius. He was here under the pretence of offering wedding congratulations to Mephius' prince and Garbera's princess. During this hectic period of time, he had gone out of his way to volunteer as an envoy for Mephius' founding anniversary. His country had also agreed it. He had charged past the others to be the

first in following up on the discussion of the assignment for the congratulatory envoy.

“For the present, I’ve laid out my hand.”

Noue had said in his room absent of people while fully in reign of his emotions. The smiling countenance he had shown in front of Ineli and Orba had been flung off. Although expressionless, that face was terrifyingly beautiful.

A fair-skinned and slim body. On top of his loosely fitted robe, his long hair flowed. No doubt his appearance bore that of a prodigal noble. And his feminine gestures—both were things he had personally taken a liking to. By Garberan standards, he was a dandy, and to go even further, simply sloven and a man unfit for a country of knights.

His behaviour aside, Noue was recognized by everyone throughout the country for his genius. The Salzantes House had ruled the lands of Rhodes generation after generation as its feudal lords. They also held vast portions of territories and strong political influence in Garbera. But Noue quickly surrendered the seat as head of the family to his younger brother and resigned from the seat of elected deputy governor of the royal capital. “That way I can rest easy,” he had claimed as the reason for his actions, but his real motive differed slightly. With the territory in his possession, he was forced to tediously perform day after day of miscellaneous duties and he wanted time to do as he pleased; time to do the work he enjoyed. Namely,

Strategy, resourceful warfare, and conquest.

In the past, he was the one who devised the stratagem on the attack on Apta Fortress where General Oubary was present. At first he only made use of the cavalry, and tirelessly repeated this method of assault. His employment of such a shoddy strategy had invited complaints from his own army and allowed the situation at Apta to turn completely against them. And Noue, as if evident to say, “Oh no it’s all over,” had his main force retreat.

But in actuality, they lay concealed near the fortress. At the same time, a pre-arranged, separate force deployed to a nearby forest in the Mephius territory moved out. They purposely allowed themselves to be discovered by a scouting party, at which time the main force mobilised, suggestively hinting their target to be the capital.

And in accordance with his predictions, the enemy forces met at Apta were successfully split. Noue, accurately gauging this timing, immediately returned with the main forces and launched an all-out offensive attack. However, the forces situated at Apta who had repelled the previously fierce cavalry assault had grown

conceited, and for this very reason, had called back for reinforcements too late. Noue deployed the unscathed airship unit, which until then had been held in reserve, and made the soldiers encamping the fortress fall in the blink of an eye, thereafter laying siege on the castle. He had successfully seized the fortress in under a month.

Six years ago.

Right. At that time, I had met Ryucown.

As he thought of that man's name, Noue looked up unimpressed at the palace, his eyes bearing only the slightest of sentiments.

Ryucown was still only a knight apprentice then. But even in those days he enthused towards his dream. He had not strived to become the ideal knight. No, he wanted Garbera to become the ideal country of knights. Having first heard that he held such a grand ambition,

What a fool.

Noue had sneered. Ryucown was no more than five years apart from him, but he still believed in such completely childish dreams. Noue was a realist. While he thought the resourcefulness of battles to be interesting, he knew that neither whole countries nor the world could so easily be swayed by them. Noue was physically weak by nature and detested those who relied only on their own armed might and bragged about it.

It was only the face and name of Ryucown who displayed his daring valour at the Battle of Apta that he remembered.

After roughly one year had come to pass, Ryucown became an official knight for defeating the rebel Bateaux. From that point on, he performed his numerous and even now praise-worthy services in the war against Mephius. Several of these had involved Noue.

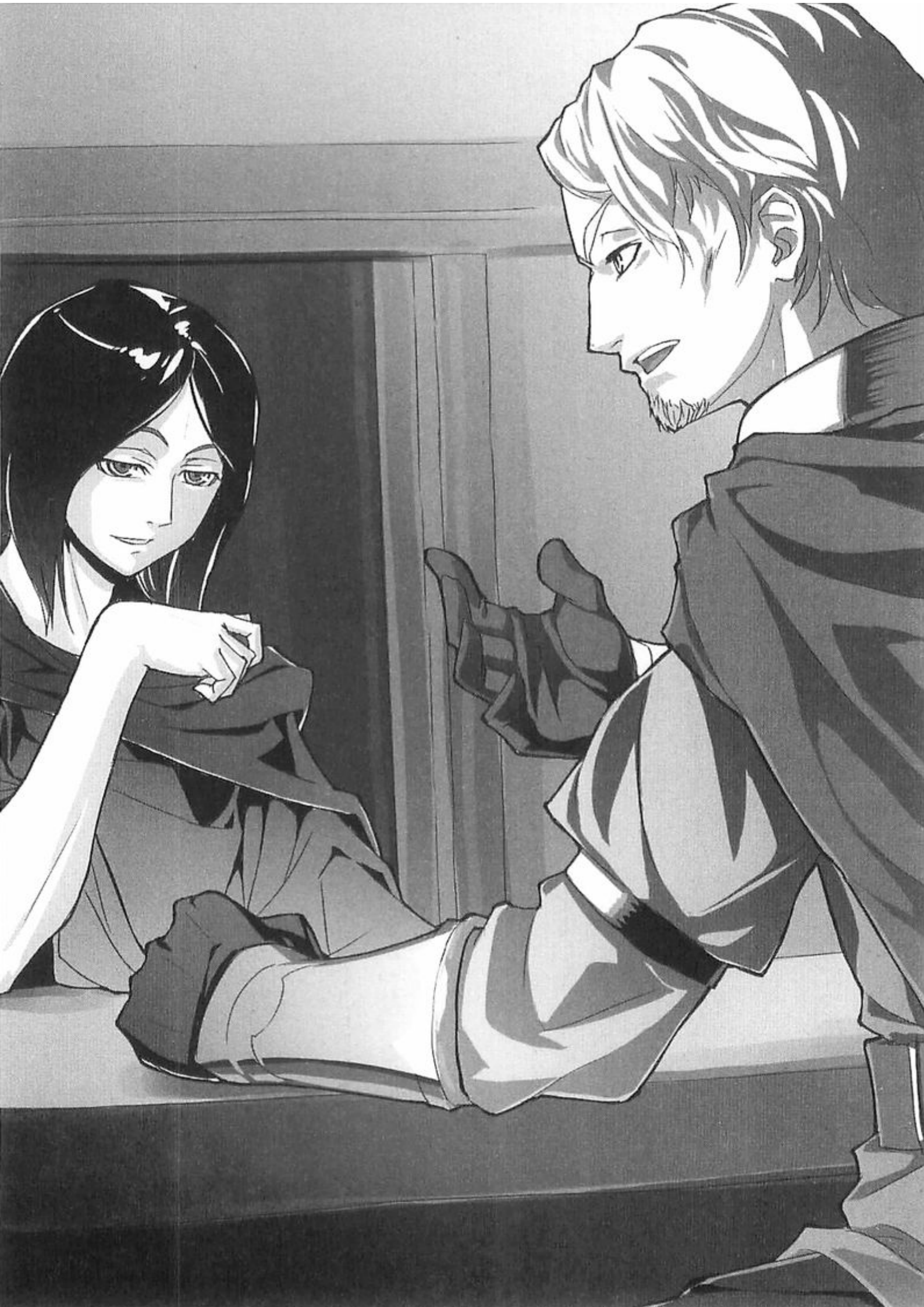
Before he went into battle, Ryucown, who had made his way to Apta, sent a messenger by airship in his place. —Noue had awarded a written proposal to the pleading man. Ryucown had already begun to win acclaim as a hero. Even though he was a man of high popularity throughout the country, he was after all first and foremost a warrior surprised by Noue’s knowledge, which played to Noue’s ill pleasantry. And each time,

“Simply fascinating,” Ryucown would candidly praise him, his eyes full of wonder. “Being here in Apta, how are you able to analyze the movements of the battlefield

and the men, who like me, are moving about through the battlefield in such great detail? It's as if you possess clairvoyance."

"The power of imagination." Noue pointed towards his own head. "Those unable to even learn, to experience, are no more than brutes, Ryucown. Men, at times, are able to draw upon their own accumulated knowledge, and the teachings handed down by their ancestors to procure their desires within this expanse world."

"I see. You are literally fighting with your head. Like this, against Arion, against Ende, no matter what country you may be facing against, it will possible to do so with your powers of simulation. Pray tell me, what it is that Garbera now needs so that I may fulfil my dream in making Garbera a world power.



"Ahahaha. You are simple-minded, Ryucown. Surely even I have not thought that far. But that does not mean it is completely out of reach. There is no need for a full picture. With enough assembled fragments of information, it will be possible to draw out the big picture."

On reciprocating his thoughts, to Noue's embarrassment, he found himself to also be simple-minded. The man known as Ryucown was simplistically straightforward and held a peculiar charm. Even men in opposition would naturally become charmed by it.

"Then I shall act as Lord Noue's eyes and ears. Be it by horse, be it by air carrier, I shall go around the world and collect Lord Noue's desired fragments. So that we, together, may make Garbera rise above all others as a gallant country."

Even as Noue laughed aloud,

If it's this man, it may be possible.

He could feel this thought welling up within him. Large dreams gave way to men's setbacks. Those setbacks would return them to reality. But for Ryucown, that dream might possibly be granted. Those eyes that looked straight forward, free of distraction, might come to obtain the said fragments.

Precisely because Ryucown held such thoughts, Noue had proposed the betrothal of Princess Vileena to Ryucown. There were sure signs of things beginning to stir. Together with Ryucown as they strived towards their dream day after day, Noue would undoubtedly come across new, never before experienced fragments.

However.

A dream was but a dream.

Noue's methodology and Ryucown's ideals were unmatched by all others. They were unable to give birth to their dreams.

In the course of advancing peace negotiations with Mephius, the princess Vileena had also been married off to Mephius. Having only looked towards his dream, Ryucown was struck far harder than Noue. Even that fortitudinous man had little choice but to return to reality. That was the one thing Noue found most vexing.

And—

Damn you, Ryucown. Why did you not call out to me even once?

That man who had always adopted the mindset of a youthful boy was not one who could be brought down to his knees when faced with reality. Unable to agree with his own country's way of handling things, he had even risen up against it. When Noue received notice of this, he was unable to do anything. No matter how much he relied on his powers of imagination, Ryucown's bright future could not be conjured. And yet another happening occurred outside his field of imagination.

Ryucown was defeated.

However—that name that was not in my predictions now is.

He was the prince of Mephius, Gil Mephius. The one deemed by rumours as an imbecile.

This man, aside for the difference in the size of their forces, managed to tear apart a fortress Ryucown occupied, and moreover, on his first campaign?...

He wanted it. The fragments of information related to this incident. Namely, the parts for him to come to terms with this fact, at the very least. If not, there was no way he could repay Ryucown for being unable to ascertain his dream.

That was why he had come here. The wind entering from the window blew against Noue's long hair. It was a breath-taking sight.

Of course, I won't be settling with only this information as a souvenir. I am not so modest. There are several things I desire; preparations towards Ende, chaos in Mephius, and the crown prince who slayed Ryucown.

Even if Noue was unable to predict everything, whilst Noue stayed at Apta, he advanced his preparations so that he could drive a wedge into a Mephius at any time. The time to use it had arrived.

I shall bring all out of it back with me.

As his black hair swayed to and fro, it glimmered with the shine of a naked blade.

Chapter 4: Sword Festival

Part 1

On this day, Zaat Quark was swamped with visitors.

In the morning was Simon Rodloom. As soon as he glimpsed Zaat's face, he asked,

"Have you become thinner?"

Zaat bitterly smiled and shook his head.

"No matter what the situation, the amount I eat and drink will not change. It's my one redeeming feature. Well, who knows what might happen in a week though."

"Milord has been reprieved of your house arrest. Now you can eat and drink to your heart's content."

"Reprieved?"

The casual manner Simon mentioned this in left Zaat flabbergasted. Simon pointed out towards the window, and sure enough, the guards surrounding the residential hall were pulling back.

This morning, Simon presented himself before the emperor, and by some stroke of luck, the two of them were able to talk alone about the festival. They spent some time discussing about Garbera, Ende's movements, and also how starting with their longtime enemy, the Bazgan House from the west, new activities have come about in a group of Tauran fortress cities. After this, Simon brought up Zaat's name seemingly by chance. And the emperor, as if he had completely forgotten it up until now, laughed it off.

"After that, the house arrest was immediately called off. His majesty was flaring up at the time of the incident, but I myself did not take it to heart. That is why I was at ease. His majesty has not bestowed any punishment or of the sorts. From here on forth as well, if you were even to show your undying loyalty for Mephius—"

"For *Mephius*," Zaat said sullenly.

He had resigned himself to bury his bones in Mephius. However…..

Whether or not he had understood the implied meaning, Simon kept silent. Zaat then raised the issue of Kaiser Islan. His execution would be held tomorrow. Even Simon could not overturn this. Zaat and Kaiser both had objected the emperor's decisions, but the emperor's sentiments towards their punishments differed greatly.

"Like this, he is no different from a sword-slave. At the whim of the audience's favour, he may be commanded to die or be allowed to live. This makes everyone

save the imperials nothing more than the emperor's slaves." Zaat said, staring down fixedly. "I, of course, love Mephius. I am quite fond of the simple nature of our people, and the militaristic trait that they, at times, possess. There is nothing in our country that can outmatch our strong and fierce troops. The ether has been exhausted, and once airship weaponry and that contemptible magic vanish from this world, the one reigning supreme in the world can be no other than Mephius. But with the way Mephius is—with our current emperor…"

"Stop, Zaat. You don't know where his ears lie."

"Lord Simon, do even you not hold him in contempt? The emperor is attempting to revive the Ryuujin Faith a second time! Most likely, it is only for the express purpose of reigning as the absolute sovereign. He would just as well brand all those who voice their objection against him as rebels. Yes, just as Jasch Bazgan once began his reign of terror in the name of the Dragon God."

The matter relating to the Ryuujin Faith was already spreading far and wide as a rumour. Of how on the eve of the festival, the summoned elders were newly set to take part in the holdings of the ritual en masse within the sanctuary of the Dragon God Shrine. And also of how Kaiser, who had opposed him would be executed under the label as the first and foremost rebel.

"The peace with Garbera is also the same. He may have lent an ear to his retainers and received their words, however that is for but a brief interim. Surely, a person of your calibre should be able to understand this. His majesty has been frequently holding meetings with a messenger from Ende one right after the next. The contents of them can be easily guessed—. When morrow comes, I would not be surprised were Princess Vileena to be chased out the country, and in her stead the marriage will proceed with the grand princess of Ende."

"That's..."

Anxiety drifted into Simon's eyes. This too, was a definitive fact. Emperor Guhl was not one to obsess over a single country such as Garbera. In vying for control of the centre of the continent, including Ende, balance in the relations between the three countries was essential. Guhl wanted to be the one pulling the strings of the remaining two countries.

The subjugation of Ryucown had served to strengthen the alliance with Garbera, but because of that, Ende could no longer afford to ignore Mephius. There were even talks Ende had proposed a beneficial alliance to Mephius; all according to Guhl's favour.

"However, if that were to happen we would lose the trust of other countries and Mephius' reputation would hit the pits. If his majesty continues to wield his power as he pleases, sooner or later Mephius will observe the hardships of decline." At this time, Zaat's eyes glimmered with light. "There are a great number of people unpleased with the emperor. If Lord Simon was to stand centre amongst them, nobles garnering high popularity and the great majority will give up their name to the cause. The few lords that there are have gathered in Solon. There is no better time than now during the festival."

"Zaat. I'll pretend I did not hear this. I will now take my leave." Simon kicked himself up from his seat. "It is precisely because we think of the future that we must be of one mind. The matter with Kaiser is most regrettable, but I have no intention of allowing the same thing to be repeated."

"All the more reason Lord Simon!"

"I can see you are more than ready to lay down your life. However, that would lead to a complete upheaval of the law. If you were to attempt to carry out your plans in a fit of impatience, unnecessary blood will be shed. The people will also get dragged into it, and this would provide a chance for other countries to strike. That's the one thing we must avoid. I'm sure you understand that, Zaat."

Simon placed his hands on Zaat's shoulders, and then left the waiting room.

That was the morning meet.

The afternoon meeting was with Oubary Bilan. Though their standings had led them to meet in person countless times until now, they had directly spoken with one another even more recently.

Oubary did not stay for long. They exchanged some idle chatter and were playing only a single bout of a recreational board game, when he immediately stood up. And as if making use of that chance, he handed a certain letter over to Zaat.

"I would like you to leave the board as is." Oubary laughed aloud, as he pointed towards the game board at the juncture of his departure. "Let us continue some other time say, when we will be exchanging a celebratory toast."

After Oubary left, Zaat had a light meal, then retreated to his study.

"Those insolent Garberans." He scanned the letter tens of dozens of times and finally let go of it, spreading it out on top of his desk. "...They plan to use me?"

Noue Salzantes' signature was signed on it. Up until now quite a few letters from Noue had been delivered, but the contents of the letter this time was far more direct. Though that being the case, the contents could hardly be praised as heroic. He had no doubt kindled the flames of revolution and was sure to expect flattery towards his end, but instead what he got practically neared a complaint.

Ever since the wedding between Prince Gil and Princess Vileena had been decided, relations between Garbera and Ende approached a state of tension. It had originally been unofficially planned for her to marry into Ende. However, Garbera decided not to place all of its trust in Ende and prioritizing the interests of its own country above all else, chose to ally with Mephius. In order to save face, Ende showed no hesitation in making full use of its diplomatic resources. Ende eased tariffs on imported goods such as silk and spices, and Garbera's second prince and head of the Tiger Order, Zeno Owell, appeared before the archduke whereby they exchanged undying oaths of friendship.

However—the archduke, Malchio Le Doria's body is nearing its end.

Through its diplomatic sources and secret intelligence network, Mephius had more or less grasped the gist of it. Malchior was a man in his fifties, but his physical condition was quickly taking a turn for the worse. Despite his appearances before the public those two times in the past year, there existed rumours that he might even have been poisoned to death. Most likely, he did not have long, or so a great many people saw it, in spite of Ende's ongoing domestic and foreign activities.

The archduke fathered two sons. The eldest was Prince Jeremie, and next in line was Prince Eric. Jeremie, though prudent, held little militaristic capabilities, and Eric profused in the arts of war, though came short in terms of prudence, the report had stated. And between them, the burly Eric seemed to desire war with Garbera, as was written in the letter.

Eric was originally the first pick to be Vileena's groom. That being the case, the alliance was scrapped and he, taking it in insult, joined hands with some of the vassals with intentions of declaring a proclamation of war against Garbera.

It stands to reason the one succeeding the position of archduke will be Jeremie. So he has anticipated forthcomings with this in mind, has he?

He was making a show of his power and actions so that he could gain the favour of the people and appear to them the more suitable candidate. Although the current archduke hoped to continue friendly relations with Garbera, it would seem it was only a matter of time until his demise, at which time Ende would ready its troops.

As such, Garbera's last ray of hope lay in its alliance with Mephius. However—

That cursed Noue. I cannot stomach that man.

Zaat had mentioned it before a couple of days ago that Guhl Mephius secretly met with a messenger from Ende. It was held in absolute secrecy, but Noue had in some way, through his informational network, grasped the contents of that meeting.

Come wartime, Noue was unnerved as to the extent of reinforcements Guhl Mephius would dispatch to Garbera. That, and the matter of Ryucown's attempted assassination of the royal family could also very possibly be brought up and Vileena be made to return to her country.

This led Noue to keep his eye on Zaat. As the valiant man who had so righteously defended the alliance with Garbera, he would spare no second thought at coming to his aid—or so was written in the letter. Garbera's aim was to currently bring about political instability in Mephius. Even though it was surely beyond Zaat's power to do so, a temporary state of confusion would, at present, relieve their fears of getting stabbed from behind.

"However," Zaat let out a low growl. Put in other words, precisely because Garbera and Ende were currently in a state of tension, was it a good opportunity to bring about reform to Mephius. Even with a temporary state of disorder, there was little concern that the other countries would intervene.

Half of the day had passed since the order for Zaat's house arrest had been dissolved, and shortly after he arranged a point of contact, he set out. Waiting in the horse wagon Zaat Quark faced were the group of soldiers under his command—leaders of the Blue Archery Division. Each and every one of them were people he placed his trust in. Since shortly before, he had relayed the signal that pressed them to ready themselves. Through the house arrest on this occasion, they understood that 'that time' drew near.

Zaat turned back at his own mansion fading out of sight. There he saw a sea of flames. He blinked his eyes several times in surprise. The rows of flames disappeared. It was an illusion.

The following day, right before noon, Simon Rodloom had unexpectedly met face-to-face with Noue Salzantes at the Solon grand stadium.

Noue had just shown himself off the carriage of a noblewoman he wooed last night, and Simon had scheduled himself to visit Kaiser, who had been transferred to the underground cellar of the stadium.

After exchanging greetings,

"I make my way here every day," Noue said with a smile. "I am completely fascinated with the gladiator games, you see. The one in the most recent year was by all means a sight to see."

"Let us cordially welcome it."

After two or three short discussions, Simon made his leave. Noue stared fixedly at the departing man.

That man is the most prominent amongst the Mephian leaders. It'd good to have him as an ally, but it would be far easier to predict his movements as the small accessory that Zaat Quark similarly is.

It was the same with Oubary Bilan. As the peace talks progressed, Noue had sent a written letter to the general. He had heard Oubary was of the faction opposed to peaceful negotiations and appeared himself to have been won over to Oubary's cause, all in a ploy to have him as another pawn under his control. Noue had investigated Oubary's character beforehand. Oubary possessed the fortitude of a soldier, and while he did have his share of achievements, wasn't the brightest of men. His way of handling things enlisted dissatisfaction and complaints, and were reflective of his own habits. He was the type of man most easy to control.

Noue repeatedly sent letters to Oubary, making him more than well aware of how highly Garbera regarded him. And in doing so, led Oubary to become all the more indignant of the unfair position he had found himself forced into in Mephius. Then Oubary remembered of how Garbera valued his true merits.

Soon enough, he sent back a letter of his own. The piece of information that the man known as Zaat Quark was also the head of the anti-imperial faction, was also received from Oubary.

I can use this.

Thinking this, Noue soon engaged Zaat by means of correspondence. Noue observed that he too, possessed an easy to manipulate personality. Zaat was a big-headed man, and like Oubary, boasted in pride.

Mephius is one big dragon. It's body, or rather, it's long lived years has swollen its pride, so much that it thinks its body larger than it truly is, thus giving me the chance to drive a wedge in. The standstill will, in the not too distant future, be dominated by us through the preparations I have set into motion.

Discontent amongst the Mephian nobles towards the emperor was smouldering. That too was, of course, also looked into. That was why he hatched a plan that only required him to throw in a single match, but then the matter with Kaiser and Zaat occurred, and things suddenly began to advance in his favour. All of this was not Noue's doing, but rather, as a result of the emperor, Guhl Mephius' conduct.

Mephius is walking the road towards its own ruin.

Mephius would, according to his plan, exhaust its good fortune. Now he could devote himself towards the country of Ende. Noue did not hope for Mephius' destruction, nor did he wish for it to be assimilated by another country. Who knows how much money and time it would take for that to happen. What Noue dwelled uneasy over was the existence of Ende's ally, the powerful eastern country of Arion. Arion's longstanding campaign in the east was said to be approaching its end. Were the country of Garbera to engage this faraway country in a single battle, it would not stand the slightest of chances. For this express purpose, Mephius mustn't be allowed to continue this troubling alliance.

Noue aimed to temporarily bring about disorder in Mephius and strike the emperor in the eye. He would back up either Zaat or the imperialists, according to whichever side offered the biggest advantages. Then he would have Oubary leading the backing, as the general completely immersed himself into the role of a 'patriotic hero'. If it was this man, the domestic situation being played out in Mephius could be read and Noue could easily plan out a means resulting in success. And above all, Mephius would without a doubt reform its alliance with Garbera this time coming.

Ever since he had enlisted the aid of Oubary within Mephius, the thought of Princess Vileena entering his plans never once surfaced.

That person is far too straightforward.

She made a fitting leader, but she also would not think to approve such a plan. Her notion of royal blood differed from that of Ryucown. But on the contrary,

If that spilt royal blood were to end up protecting Garbera...

A level-headed glimmer dwelt within both his eyes, underneath that indifferent, smiling guise.

As Noue thought over his strategy, Simon met with Kaiser in the dungeon. Though it could be called a meeting, it was one across the prison bars where but only a mere five minutes worth of conversation was allowed.

As such, Simon left out the extended greetings.

“How is your family?”

“I have told them not to come.” Kaiser turned pale and then smiled. “Milord, what of the future of the Kaiser House?”

“I know. Leave it to me.”

“Thank you.”

Kaiser remained an upright man ‘til the very end. To Simon, he was a sincere man with little to no taste. However, he felt it truly representative of this one man, that he remained sincere and all too serious for his own good, to this end.

“What of his majesty?” he said, as he gazed at the ceiling from below. “Has he had a change of heart?”

“_“

“I do not hold a grudge against him. Just that, at the time the previous empress, Lana-sama was alive, granted he still held a fiery temper, but no matter who the person, it would become a cause for celebration so long as he held the strength his majesty desired. But now, his majesty cannot even trust himself. In this one month, I have wept, clamoured, and cried out some thousand complaints across the empty skies, but right now, it will not serve to move His Majesty to tears.”

It was sometimes even murmured within the palace walls. At the time Lana was around, the emperor would often listen carefully to his vassals. That was no doubt thanks to Lana’s generous personality. The one check in place was lost, and the emperor began to act as he pleased.

That is surely the case.

Simon and Kaiser had acted as a support for the emperor since he was young. They were well familiar with the previous empress Lana and the relationship he held with her while they were married.

The emperor trusted many to a problematic extent, but by nature held a reserved personality.

Currently, he was remarried to Melissa and appeared to be brimming with the energy of a youth. His relation with her certainly seemed just as well as with his former wife, but Simon saw this as no more than an appearance.

Is it not as if he has lost his support?

Simon couldn't help but feel the emperor was determined to shut himself in. He could no longer recognize his longtime friend Simon within the depths of his heart, nor did he offer any love to his own son, Gil Mephius.

—Afterwards, Simon and Kaiser engaged in a lighthearted chat. Simon never said the words, 'I'm sorry.' That was the one thing he knew he mustn't say. "This will not happen a second time," he said to Zaat with conviction. Simon was most angry with himself for being unable to stop Zaat's procession.

And after Simon took his leave, he, for some strange reason, recalled the memories of a man, whose name was but all he had heard, and whose very being he knew nothing about. This man, with whom he felt a bond of sorts.

The man named Ryucown.

He had the makings of a fool.

The rebellion stirred up by Ryucown was one with no future. It was one unaware of the times, or possibly one that attempted to shun away from the times. It was the act of a fool. It was tomfoolery that caused blood to be shed; tomfoolery that invited disorder.

However... Simon thought. *Wasn't that something he himself was fully aware of?* He acted and put his life on the line knowing that there was no precedence and knowing that it was doomed to fail. All the washed blood, the spilt blood, towards his own country of Garbera mustn't be let to go to waste.

That was Ryucown's cry.

That was how Simon felt it.

Part 2

Lined up on the table were freshly looking fruits and drinks. There was a plentiful selection of meat, as if indicative to that of a glutton, that was more than likely to make one sick following their morning bout.

Orba barely delved into his meal, having only eaten one or two mouthfuls of bread. Though that is to say, this was not a problem of time or his health.

It was because he was joined by the emperor for his morning meal. Guhl, Melissa, Ineli, and the younger sister, Flora, and not limited to the members of the imperial family, Simon Rodloom, the military commander, Odyne Lorgo, and one of the senior statesmen, Colyne Isphan, were included in this breakfast meet.

The emperor had, in this manner, received those who sought his audience and invited them to join him for his morning meal, where he would listen to their concerns. Though it could be considered a vain act, it was a custom that had not changed since long past, and was still enacted to this day.

It was Orba's first time participating in such a gathering. Until now, one reason or another was used to excuse himself from attending. Fedom wanted to avoid having the person acting as Gil meet with his own family and those immediate relatives who knew him well. But this time was different. He had kept Fedom out of the knowing. Had Fedom known, he would have used all means to obstruct him, and might have even forced his way into Orba's company.

Well then.

Orba was nervous, but he had awaited this chance; the talking had reached a point of complete silence. Orba took a deep breath, and then opened his mouth.

"Father."

Everyone looked on at Orba in light surprise. The former prince Gil might have refrained from speaking out. The emperor's eyes also widened as he faced Orba.

"What is it?"

"I would like to make a request."

"Oh? Could it be that you want something? A horse maybe? Or could it be you want the position of general? If it's the crown you desire, it's still too early for you."

The emperor said to his good humour. He had most likely anticipated a rather 'lively' response, but Orba did not notice it.

"It is about the gladiator games."

"Speak."

The emperor's mood did a complete turnaround, as he spoke in ill humour. Since morning, he had been downing the fruit wine as if it were water. It wasn't as if Orba had'nt noticed the change in ambience, but for now, he assertively voiced his thoughts.

"I would like you to allow a member of the Imperial Guards, the one who defeated Ryucown, to participate in the gladiator games held during the festival."

The unexpected proposal provoked murmurs of interest from everyone, with the exemption of the emperor. Oubary and the rest shone with anticipation. The emperor snorted at Orba.

"Again, why now of all times?"

"I have heard of how many hope for Orba to participate. The people too will certainly be joyed."

"What do you think you're saying?" The emperor stared directly at Orba. "The people will be joyed? You're just using that as a pretence. You hope for your Imperial Guard to win so that you will have more to brag about, do you not? Rather, why don't you participate yourself? It's not as if no member of the imperial family ever participated before."

"Y-You must be joking."

Orba quickly lowered his head, fearful the emperor might have seen through him as the gladiator he was. Orba was sure this was the reason, but the emperor, Guhl Mephius' gaze held a pressure on a completely different scale compared to those he had faced until now.

"Hmph," the emperor snorted. "Well, it might not hurt to let things go as you want it. At the very least, I want to see a victory deserving of a hero."

"P-Please wait, Your Imperial Majesty!"

The one who had cut in was Simon Rodloom. A strained mood hung in the air. Naturally, it was because everyone present was well aware of the incident that occurred in the Dragon God's Shrine.

"If I may have a word, I implore you to not just let things run its course, but take a deeper look at the implications of an Imperial Guard participating in the games. Yes, gladiators may not wholly be slaves, but to allow a member of his royal highness'

Imperial Guard to be killed in front of the audience's eyes will somewhat damage our authority."

"Ho."

"Your majesty previously mentioned that in the history of Mephius, it was not without incident that a member of the imperial family participated in a gladiatorial match, but the circumstances of the era were far too different and should not be used as a comparison."

"Ho," the emperor said once more. He placed his chin against his arm that rested against the armchair and glared at Simon through his heavy-lidded eyes. At that time, Colyne Isphan spoke up.

"Is it not all right? We of Mephius are a country of swords and dragons. Birthplace and lineage have no dealings in it. It is in our blood for us to compete."

"Still—"

"And also, the Imperial Guard who defeated Ryucown is most certainly a hero. However, he was also originally a sword slave, and as such the people too will hesitate in openly praising him. If I may venture, have the lords and each and every one of the generals not likewise, been at a loss over whether or not it be appropriate to invite him to tonight's evening party? It stands to reason that there is meaning in that Imperial Guard competing for Clovis' seat."

"Well put."

The emperor nodded his head approvingly, as Colyne humbled himself. Colyne excelled in plays such as these. He read the emperor's feelings, and even if the emperor held any sentiments, he warped the reasoning behind it, making it seemingly appear even more sound when he spoke it.

"Those who have obtained the same honour that Clovis and his aide Felipe have, supposing that they were born a slave, competed every year for that title. They are by all means a hero. Amongst them are also those who have risen to become a general. —This instance dates back no more than thirty years ago in our history, does it not, Simon?"

"—Yes."

Every year, the gladiator tournament held during the festival awarded the winning two gladiators, who won through all others, as heroes. On the final day, those heroes would lead the two hundred remaining slaves and fight against the dragons as part

of the main event. Even in Mephius' history, the hero Clovis and his aide Felipe and all those who followed after them were, regardless of their origin, officially enlisted into the Mephian forces.

"Up to the remaining last, they have all been heroes that do not shame their title. Those who lose are only able to amount to that much, but those fallen warriors who compete for the seat of Clovis are great men who sacrifice themselves for Mephius' tradition. There will be no damage to our authority or anything of the like."

"Ohh."

"I see, that certainly holds true."

The other nobles showered him with praise, after which Simon offered no further protest. Like this, they had left the prince in question out of their conversation. During this time,

"So you listened to my request, brother."

Ineli stealthily sneaked out a smile that spread across her whole face.

Orba did not respond to her with even a simple "ahh," or "yea." Even so, she didn't mind. She was already lost in her own thoughts.

"Were he to say, win as the champion, I must by all means be the one to hand him the golden helmet that is proof of Clovis. At that time, I will announce him as the hero who had also saved the imperial princess, Ineli, from the claws of a dragon."

Orba being Orba was at present, preparing for the next phase of his plans in his head, unaware that Ineli was talking like a young girl who spoke of her dream, and that nested within were malicious sentiments that sought to come into possession of the masked gladiator, Orba.

Rumours of Orba's participation spread throughout the palace in no time at all. Though he may have been a former gladiator, it was an unprecedented situation where a member of the imperial guards participated in the games. People's responses naturally went both ways.

"The prince has been living up to our expectations."

There being those wholeheartedly approved of it,

"Is the prince not only pulling along at the glory of his first campaign?"

There were also those who criticized him behind his back.

One person, Fedom Aulin, upon chancing on these rumours exploded into a fit of rage. For him, the puppet, Orba, whom he had gone through great lengths to put in place, was nonsensically throwing his own life into harm's way under his very nose. However, Orba had directly appealed to the emperor and it was already something Fedom could no longer overturn.

"Only two or three battles to go."

Orba, concealing his plans of trapping Noue and Oubary, spoke in a carefree tone.

"Now this odd. Right now, in this whole world, you'd think the one worrying most for my life would be you."

"Shut your mouth." Fedom's expression stammered, as if he were seriously about to faint. "Listen well. You mustn't die. That much is obvious, but you also mustn't get hurt. It will be suspicious when you return as the prince. Argh, curses!! You better prepare yourself. Once the festival is over, I'll tie you up in chains like when you were a slave!"

And of course, that rumour had also reached Vileena Owell's ears. As soon as she heard this, she shook off Theresia's restraint and headed towards the prince.

In preparation for tomorrow's stage appearance, Orba left his room and first headed over to the stadium grounds.

His decision to take part in the games was obviously not because the people had wished it. He thought to obtain a means of contacting Pashir through this tournament. Oubary had clearly mentioned this sword slave's name. There was no doubt Pashir played a significant role in his plans. Orba would rile up his plans in every way possible.

"Oh?"

Just then, he happened across Vileena, who ran his way. Her lips were closed shut and her eyes twisted upwards. Last night, when she had come to visit him, her aggressive manner remained well hidden. It now resurfaced now once again. And it was ever more so direct. It was as if he were guilty of having done something that earned her disfavour.

"Why?"

Vileena began her accusing inquiry.

"Why, being?"

"Orba. Why did you make him participate in the games?"

"Oh. Does he have something to do with the princess?"

"He—"

Vileena, who had flown into a rage, found herself tongue-tied. Orba began to walk past her a second time. He would never have thought the princess' business was about himself. Now knowing this, he no longer felt like arguing with her.

"He is a dear friend."

As those words tore at him from behind, his feet suddenly came to a halt.

The fourteen year old princess strengthened her gaze.

"...That is why this is a matter not unrelated to me. Up until now, he has lived through difficult battles, overcome them, and he has finally been freed from those bonds and become a free man. You are forcing him to fight just as he was made to when he was a slave. And to what ends?"

"Garbera's princess does not know of it. You view the gladiator games as a living hell, but it's Mephius' top entertainment. That even a single more well-known gladiator participates will liven the mood of the festival."

"Are you not selling yourself to the festival's mood so that you will receive everyone's attention? Even if you have to sacrifice Orba's life to do it!"

"He won't die," Orba said with a brooding face.

The foreign princess' cheeks flushed and she drew even closer to him. Her face was reminiscent of one other time. It completely matched the one she made when she squared off against the prince as they proceeded for Zaim Fortress for not making a single move.

"Why do you say so?"

"That's...because he's Orba. He's never lost once. As his dear friend, you should trust in his abilities."

"That is not what I am saying!"

"This is also what Orba wants. Do not speak any further on this, princess."

No matter how he tried to suppress it, his irritation continued to build up. The way he spoke of himself appeared the same way those very Mephian nobles would.

“Still, to think you were his friend,” Orba ridiculed. What do you know about him? Do you know how many lives he’s taken? Someone like you and those ‘prided’ nobles and knights find battles to be grave, honourable, and meaningful. He fights not for any of these reasons, but only so that he can survive. He stains himself with flesh and blood *only so that he can survive.*

“That is because you Mephian nobles...”

“SHUT UP!!”

Having exceeded his emotional threshold, Orba’s anger ran rampant in his words.

“Do not call yourself Orba’s friend a second time. Do not speak to him. Don’t act as if you know everything just because you are royalty.”

Vileena instantly became enraged. However, contrary to her appearance, she stood stock still and did not utter a single word.

Orba, lost in his emotions and not knowing what to do with them, quickly left the scene.

Who am I?

His heavy footsteps, together with the throbbing of his heart gnawed away at him as Orba questioned his own sense of self.

"As a gladiator, I am someone who cannot become something like the princess’ friend."

"As a slave, I cannot stand when the princess speaks as if she is aware of the circumstances of a slave."

"As the prince, I don’t mind even if Orba has to be sacrificed to accomplish my goals."

"Who...am I?"

As he repeatedly questioned himself, he quickly lost all awareness of the outside world.

This day, Orba headed towards the stadium and arrived shortly before the sun set. The games for the day had already come to a close, and there were no traces of people on the stadium seats.

The sword slaves emerged little by little onto the stadium grounds. Of the gladiators participating in the tournament, all those that held the status of slave were held in a stadium-equipped detention camp. There, they passed the day working their bodies on the vast stadium grounds in preparation for their match the following day.

The guards kept an eye on the centre, where the gladiators freely swung their swords, practiced their footwork, and engaged in one-on-one mock battles.

Then the masked gladiator suddenly appeared. Naturally, stares were thrown at him from all over. They likely had heard stories of him to some extent, and although they did not seem surprised, they neither called out to him nor approached him. Instead, a stadium attendant came up to him.

"I have heard stories of you. However, there is no need for you to go out of your way to stay here. On the day of your battle, we will send over a guide to pick you up."

"It's an atmosphere I haven't experienced in a while. I'd like to get used to it."

The attendant gave out a baffled response, and then brought out a sword for him. Orba began his stretches and then proceeded to swing his sword. And once again, the slaves only watched. It could also be said that they were unable to disregard him and clear away their interest in him.

He pretended to do his exercise routine, directing his gaze at the slaves countless times, but never eyed Pashir amongst them.

The gladiator games had two days remaining. If Pashir was taking part in Noue's plans, regardless of what his role was, he would likely make his move within these two days. He held the status of a slave, and could not move as he pleased. This meant Noue's plans would progress within the detention camp.

Until then, he needed to get closer to Pashir and grasp the entirety of his plans.

Orba felt impatient, but also firmly thought to himself, *I can't rush things.*

What lay at stake was Mephius' future, in other words, the hope he had at long last attained, the position of Prince Gil.

—The princess' life, huh

He twisted his body around and stepped one foot out as he slashed the sword diagonally downwards.

Part 3

The following day.

Through a small window chiselled into a stone wall, Orba watched the progress of the gladiator games. He was in the waiting room for gladiators. As he held the status of a slave in this situation, he was placed in the same anteroom as the other sword slaves, but his being an Imperial Guard placed him in a narrow, but specially prepared room. Of course, his feet were also free of chains.

Just as when he had previously come here with Ineli and the others, a great number of games were simultaneously taking place. And yet to be seen amongst them was Orba's match, whose turn was soon to follow suit.

"Over here please."

A stadium slave girl entered the room and lay down his equipment. He recognized this girl. She was the girl who carried tea over to them when he came here with Ineli and company. Her refreshingly orderly features had left an impression on him.

She assisted Orba in putting on the leather armour. He inserted the sword as one would in the olden days into a round shield, and wore clothing and sandals that also seemed well past the times.

"These are some pretty old equipment."

"They bear the symbol of Clovis' era. There's likely none who actually know if the gladiators of ancient times had taken part in this appearance. But it's a matter of setting up the mood."

He found something humourous in the way she shrugged her shoulders. Somewhat intrigued, he asked for her name, and Orba received 'Mira' as her reply. And in doing so, she fidgeted around, as if there was something she wanted to say.

"You are a person belonging to the prince's Imperial Guard, correct? It is rude for someone like me to request for you to pass on a message, but if you were to happen to have the chance, could you extend my gratitude towards the prince?"

"Gratitude?"

"For offering his aid to Pashir-sama."

With her face slightly flushed, Mira exited the room.

Oh?

Pashir seemed to be hard-headed and the type that was uncanningly popular amongst women.

Once he was alone Orba, just as he had done in the past before a match, leaned against the wall and took a deep breath.

So I'm here again.

So I'm here 'again'.

Though he planned to keep a hold on his thoughts, his emotions had wormed their way out and left Orba listless. Early morning, Ineli and the rest had, before Prince Gil, invited him to observe the festival with them. It was to watch none other than the gladiator games, but of course, Orba turned them down, claiming he felt heavy-headed.

Ineli did say she saw me at Ba Roux—

That would be the time the Sozos turned violent. He was surprised to find the prince himself had also come. This meant he was still alive at that time.

Could the prince have possibly been killed by Fedom? Did he plan to make me a body double from the start and has been waiting for this chance all along?

His thoughts were in pieces, and he couldn't concentrate the least bit. Then, Pashir's name was called out repeatedly.

Orba snuck a glimpse and saw Pashir was in the middle of a one-on-one fight. He fought in a well-controlled manner, just like the last time Orba had seen him. He triumphed through three matches unscathed. And before he had any time to admire it, Orba's turn was up.

His name was called by the guard and he exited the room. The other slaves were crammed into a series of antechambers. All their eyes followed Orba. From the front, from the sides, from all the way around the back, gazes pierced him from all directions.

As he continued to walk down the passage, Pashir exited the stage and made his way here from the other end. With deep black coloured hair and moustache, his

height was slightly taller than Orba, though he possessed a massive frame. Seeing it again, it could be considered the ideal proportionate body.

His breathing heaved and his eyes were bloodshot immediately following the battle. He crossed paths with Orba.

"...Damned dog."

Pashir spat out at a moment's notice. Orba turned around and saw the back of the bulky man. A branded bruise mark could be seen; the mark of an X with a line straight down the centre. Orba's back, likewise, bore that same mark. The mark of a slave.

"You damned Mephian dog. You better not lose until you face me. I'll break you into pieces with these hands."

Pashir spoke without turning back. Orba saw that mark burn up with his will and passion as it faded into the distance.

So that's how it is.

Pashir was a slave. Granted, he had his own circumstances that led him to become one, but judging from the way he spoke, he hated Mephius. And aside from the Mephians, he hated the one praised as a hero, the one who had become an Imperial Guard.

Though it was an absurd argument, right now it served as Orba's shackles. It would be difficult to gain Pashir's trust like this. And that he had gone out of his way to cross paths with Orba sparked a certain conviction within him.

If it's like 'this', there's a number of ways I go about this.

Just before he came out the arched entranceway, a bright light flashed at him and with each step he took, the light filled up the large ring, until the ring in its entirety was painted white.

"It's Orba!"

"It's the Iron Tiger!"

Cheers roared down on him like a tidal wave, overwhelming Orba from every angle.

Even those in the first row were situated so far and high away from Orba, that even his face seemed smaller of a grain of rice, and unable to see him, they crammed the seats full in their zeal to get a better view.

Memories of the times when he stood straight out in the open as he worked himself into a sweat battling vividly came back to him. Each time his heart beat, his muscles pumped up, as if every nerve bundled into that single fibre.

“Imperial guard Orba, forward!”

Orba’s opponent was a man named Miguel Tes. He passed off as a hopeful up-and-coming gladiator, and according to Shique’s impression of his first match,

“He’s a smart gladiator that sticks to the basics.”

So it seemed.

“If you’re gonna do it, do it with resolve.”

Orba recalled how the day before, Gowen had repetitively nagged this to him.

He was first opposed to Orba participating in the tournament. “You haven’t wielded a sword for over a month. You should know that winning through a series of battles in the arena won’t be likely,”—Gowen reprimanded Orba with a sigh, well aware of his stubborn streak.

“Don’t make light of your opponent just because he’s your typical gladiator. Rather, it’s because they’re like this that makes them strongest in their final moments. No matter how strong you get, how great you become, never forget the basics. Every technique, every scheme, every eye-catching killer move out there is founded on the basics. And maintain your composure.”

Gowen had even intruded into the prince’s room and annoyed him to no end. “If you do this, you won’t die.”

I know that.

He walked towards the centre of the Solon arena and faced Miguel Tes. Blond hair and blue eyes, aged near twenty, he was a man with handsome features. His blue eyes looked straight at Orba and a faint smile could be eyed at the corners of his mouth. His current profile in the games was ten matches and ten wins.

“My best regards.”

Miguel greeted him without a hint of hesitation. Orba never once replied back to gladiators who greeted him in this way. He stayed silent this time as well.

“Ryucown should be the strongest of the Garberan knights right?” the young man bluntly pointed out, and then further continued speaking. “He’s also the man

Mephius is most afraid of. Which would mean up against any Garberan knight, any Mephian soldier, you who defeated him would still be stronger. There's no better match I could ask for."

He smiled and revealed his white teeth. His composure seemed to indicate he had already experienced more than over fifty battles.

"If he beats that Miguel, his popularity will skyrocket even outside of Solon."

Today, Ineli was also seated in the exclusive seating area for nobles. She enjoyed herself in the front row as a slave girl poured tea out for her.

"That's a nice expression on him. He has brains, and I'm sure many women want to support him."

"As if."

Baton Cadmus, who sat next to her, said. The fat Troa stood at the stands completely engrossed in buying food.

"And? Is he Orba? I thought so, but isn't he fairly thin? Or rather, isn't he just a kid?" Baton arrogantly spat out.

His attitude towards Ineli was clearly different from when Gil was around. But Ineli didn't really feel the need to nitpick at it.

"Isn't he just a returning gladiator who's full of himself? Well, I'd like to see how he lives through this. I've always been thinking it was impossible that no matter where he went and who he faced, he was always the stronger. There's no way a single person can be that resourceful."

"But, he killed a dragon before my very eyes."

"That's also suspicious. It's a ploy to liven up the crowd, not to mention the dragon was also drugged...Ow!"

Ineli stepped on Baton's feet with as hard as she could, causing him to jump up. Ineli glared at him the whole time.

"Really, I was attacked! It'd be different if I was in on it."

She brushed him off with the swing of a hand, as if Baton was asking for it.

"Hmph. Well, why don't I take a look at his skill then. The skills that Miguel showed yesterday were fairly good."

She was aware that the crowd was already chanting Miguel's name. Because he had caught the eyes of the people of Solon within this stage filled with gladiators, it proved his ability was the real deal.

Well, you'll just have to see for yourself then.

Her plump lips formed a smile. The cheers calling out Orba's name were also loud. But they only knew him in name. A sense of superiority welled up within her, knowing this hero had personally saved her.

On the other end, placed opposite the seating area for the Mephian nobles, was a seating area for guests where the Garberan messenger, Noue Salzantes, was present. He looked on in the midst of the heated enthusiasm, maintaining a refreshingly beautiful appearance that women would die for.

"Begin."

The one-on-one fight between Orba and Miguel commenced. Miguel promptly tried to dive in. However, that was a feint, and he had only stamped out his forefoot. Orba quickly leapt backwards. Miguel shrugged at the overly excessive response and invited laughter from the spectators.

Only one person.

"See *that*?"

Ineli smirked, as if she knew everything. When Miguel tried to go forward, Orba retreated back. His back hunched, he continued to maintain a distance that allowed him to gauge his opponent's move.

"He's like a cat," Baton laughed. Ineli ignored him.

Miguel dashed in in all seriousness. And Orba also leapt back, hoping to gain distance. But this time, Miguel did not stop his feet. He demonstrated excellent footwork that made it seem almost as if he were being drawn in to Orba, and pressed on.

Two, three times, blades flashed between the two. Orba seemed to have forced the blows back, but Miguel was steadily shortening their distance. Orba's feet stopped. Miguel's attack, disguised as a feint, had finally reached his mask.

The crowd gasped in amazement at how in that instant, Orba was within hand's reach of Miguel. It was not that the sword had reached the mask so much as Orba

stepping in, resulting in the tip of the sword thrusting itself against the mask into a forceful halt.

At a distance where even their hilts were side by side, the slightly startled Miguel hoped for a contest of brute strength. In this moment of hope, Orba once more leapt back. Miguel having exerted his strength, stumbled forward. Orba's sword came sweeping down on him. The series of skilfully employed bodily manoeuvres left Ineli wide-eyed.

At the same time, the shrill clang of metal sounded off. In an immediate attempt to defend, Miguel's sword was sent flying in the air. He fell, hands and knees on the ground. As Orba gripped his sword again in an attempt to put an end to the battle, Miguel slammed his fists onto the ground a second time. That was the signal for surrender.

"Oooh." Gasps absent of despair and praise were let out from the vicinity.

Orba looked up at his surroundings.

In the arena, assuming a situation where the match was decided and the loser's life was intact, the outcome of his life was left to the audience's discretion. If the majority gave the thumbs-down in dissent, the loser's life would mercilessly be brought to an end. Conversely, if the majority of crowd arose and waved their hands in chorus, he would for the present, be exempt from death.

There were many instances where popular gladiators as well as those swordsmen who displayed a brilliant match were allowed to live.

But even if that were the case, should the thrill of the moment be found to be particularly lacking, or the audience unsatisfied with the amount of carnage, they would desire a brutal ending.

By a stroke of good fortune, Miguel received a lot of support and was spared. Orba flung his sword away and left the side of the loser. Orba had displayed an overwhelming difference in ability, but the crowd was instead perplexed by the sudden conclusion.

"Did you see that? Did you, Baton, Troa? His overwhelming strength!"

The only one crying out in excitement was Ineli. "Yeah," Baton replied, not particularly too happy about it. And Troa, who hadn't the faintest idea of the rules of the arena simply nodded in agreement.

What Baton found most displeasing was how her eyes moistened and her cheeks dyed red. He suspected it did not result from bloodlust. And in fact, Ineli was unusually worked up. While watching Orba's fight, the scene that unfolded in Ba Roux vividly came back to her.

At the time the Sozos approached her, she felt nothing but fear. The silhouette of the masked gladiator after saving her, as she slumped down onto the floor and looked up at him, was forever etched into her memory. She was a girl tired of everyday life and always in pursuit of thrills. Thinking back to that scene, her heart throbbed and a pleasurable feeling filled within.

However, while she supported the masked gladiator, she also hated him. He had not spared her a single glance and left her there when he saved her from the dragon. And to add further insult, he offered his hand to that foreign princess of all things, just when Ineli had only been one step away from striking her a blow that would humiliate her beyond redemption. She could not forgive him for that.

If you're going to win, win with a bang. I want you recognized by everyone as a hero.

And when you die, die a dog's death. Then I'll tear that mask off your dead body."

These two conflicting feelings clashed, stirring up a tempest of emotions, but Ineli could still feel her body trembling from the sway of a pleasant sensation.

"I wonder if he can't somehow be invited to tonight's party. It would be improper if I personally sent over a messenger. Baton, can't you do something about it?"

Many gladiators were invited as guests to the nightly parties hosted in the palace and noble residential halls during the festival. And by inviting the highly popular gladiators, the nobles elevated their standing.

"Can't you just ask the prince to do it?" Baton replied, not the least bit interested.

"He is the prince's imperial guard after all."

"Don't you think I know that? I'm asking this because I can't rely on my brother," Ineli said with a pout.

Troa smiled with a kebab plastered against his face. "He's feeling unwell again. He must have been scared stiff from the battlefield."

"Ah, forget it. That's right! Maybe I could ask Fedom. He's the director of the Gladiator guild, right? I wonder if I could negotiate something with him about Orba."

Even as they were talking, the next set of gladiators came out and proceeded to bet their lives on their sword.

After that, Orba fought two more matches. He was pit against a golden haired animal, supposedly transported over from the eastern lands, of which his name took after, a tiger, and then crossed swords against gladiators in a two for one.

Both ended in satisfying victory. This was different from when he placed himself in the foreign environment that was the palace. In a battle where he held a sword in hand, he had nothing to fear.

His unwavering display of ability did not fall short of the spectators' expectations, but the way he went about the battles were somewhat plain and left the arena-loving citizens of Solon slightly on the unsatisfied side.

The day's gladiator games finished before sunset. Orba did not return to the palace this night and requested the supervisor of the camp to sleep in the same room as the slaves. His stated reason was that returning there every time would be annoying.

Orba joined the slaves at the dining location. The barely clothed men sitting on the stone benches handed out the plates that the slave girls would fill with what small meals they had. While eating his meal bare-handed, Orba thought to himself how he hadn't experienced this in a while, and found it strangely amusing how this environment evoked a feeling of nostalgia.

There was little to no talking. They were all people sent in by slave companies from various regions. Certainly, it would be strange to see them happily talking away when they would be forced to kill one another the following day, but the current atmosphere was somehow different. Like the previous day, they were all conscious of Orba. But no one called out to him. They only continued in silence.

Orba glimpsed at Pashir who was seated opposite him. He was once again looking in Orba's direction. When their eyes met, he would immediately raise his empty cup into the air and Mira would rush over in a trot carrying a vase and pour water into the cup.

The man apparently supervising the slaves showed himself temporarily, but left without a word. Just as their meals were about to come to an end, Pashir suddenly spoke up.

"The likes of you coming here has had one good thing happen."

Orba stared half gapingly, without a clue as to what Pashir was saying.

“The warden always drives us out, but he held himself back with the likes of you, an Imperial Guard being here. Thanks to that, we’ve had our fill of time to eat.”

Pashir gave a hearty laugh and everyone similarly chimed in.

A short while after they quieted down,

“Why have you come here? You are a hero of Mephius. Are you that confident in killing others?”

“I was ordered to come. What else could it be? Don’t speak as if I have the same tastes as a slave.”

Orba purposely denied their claims and stood up from his seat. He alone was the only one without chains fastened to his feet. Then just as he was about to leave,

“There’s no difference between you or us. Even if your feet aren’t wrapped in chains, if you were ordered to kill, then you’re the same as a slave. I’d say you’re just a beast in chains made to kill in public.”

“Shut up.”

After raising his voice, he walked off in large strides.

Shortly after leaving their midst, Orba’s feet stopped as he lost himself in thought. He harvested from the short exchange just now.

Pashir resents Mephius. He hates it.

This plan then, would not serve to benefit the Mephian nobles.

Did Oubary and Zaat propose this plan while keeping their names under wraps, or is this Noue’s scheme to retaliate against Mephius?”

Tomorrow, Orba was set to take part in a match on dragonback. It would be a match between two fighters saddled onto a medium-sized Baian.

Of course, Orba had’nt set foot here only to kill other slaves. He needed to make full use of what little time he had.

Chapter 5: Masked Clash

Part 1

Orba left the detention camp early that morning. His match was in the afternoon. His trip back to, and then return from the palace took approximately two hours.

There were only a few short hours until the opening act. The gladiators were training in groups in preparation for the upcoming fight on the stadium grounds. Like the other day, the masked gladiator set foot in there with them. And like last time, they tried to ignore him, though in fact, their attention was stolen away by him the entire time.

The masked gladiator did not hold a sword in his hand, nor did he remove his clothes to do stretches, only continuing to walk around their vicinity.

Ever since Pashir cursed him out as a 'dog', the other sword slaves no longer viewed Orba as the same slave that they were. Instead, he was now an enemy that worked for Mephius. In fact, most of the eyes chasing after that masked warrior held hostility.

If that Mephius-hating Pashir is following through with this plan alone, then the plan must match along with his goals.

That was what Orba suspected. In that case, it was better to get closer to Pashir and those who hated and resented Mephius. He might even be able to take part in this plan himself if things went well. Orba *smoothly* stroked his bare face and began to climb down the stairs of the stadium seats. Yes, since some time ago, Orba had been looking down at the stadium grounds. And to this gladiator walking around the grounds,

"Orba!"

He called out. He could only force a smile at the irony in calling out his own name, and jumped down onto the stadium grounds.

The masked gladiator made his way towards Orba. Well aware he had drawn the attention of everyone,

"I have to say, you did a great job yesterday. You've made me proud. But don't think I'll be satisfied with just this."

"..."

'Orba'—or rather, this masked gladiator, did not respond.

"Your opponent today seems to be Gash, an enemy soldier from the ten year war with Garbera, said to have beheaded a hundred men on the battlefield. He's a freak feared as the 'Demonic Beast of a Hundred Kills', once freed from being a slave for his services, and cast off as a slave a second time for killing his commander. He's also attracted the people's attention. You get it, right? What the people want to see is for that hero to be struck down by the sword of the new hero, you. Then the value of me, who appointed you, is sure to go up. Listen up. Kill him quickly and surely. I won't permit a close match. Kill him with a single blow. Understand?"

In truth, the masked gladiator said nothing. However, he pulled off an act as if he had. And opposite him, Orba suddenly slapped that mask off his face.

"Don't talk back to me, scum! So you already think you're a hero? Who do you think the one who saved you from being a slave is? Gash is a strong opponent? Yea, he's not weak, I'll give you that. But, if that so called strong Gash won't be killed by you, then I have no more use for you. I'll have you made a slave again in under a minute! Got it?!"

Orba shouted in all his arrogance, leaving the masked warrior in the dust.

He cast a fleeting glance at the lowly gladiators, who sent hateful looks his way.

"All set," Orba murmured, and then he headed towards the dragon's abode, which happened to also be located near the stadium grounds. The dragons used in the gladiator games were all put in cages. There were also noticeably larger cages whose interiors stood empty. On the final day two days from now, the two men chosen as Clovis and Felipe would lead two hundred slaves to fight against several large dragons. The cages were likely readied for that purpose.

"Orba."

Hou Ran called out to him using this name. Although there were no signs of anyone around, he raised his fingers in front of his lips in a panic. "Shh!" Hou Ran, finding it humorous, imitated him and performed the same gesture.

"How complicated, having two names that is. Dragons associate no meaning to the sound of names, but I can teach them the general concept. Which one do you want me to teach them?"

"Can't you just go with whichever?"

Unreasonable as it may be, he held a grudge against Ran. But he had now forgotten it.

"How about it, which Baian can I handle best?" he asked.

The battle with Gash in today's semifinals was on dragonback, riding the medium-sized Baian. This was something that even Orba had only experienced a few times.

"If you're looking for those used to people riding their backs, there are some. They've been trained for military use so they listen to commands. It's just that this child here would suit you better."

Hou Ran caressed the snout of the sole dragon struggling to jut its head out between the cage bars. She narrowed her almond eyes.

"Do you remember him? You've ridden him before."

"Sure."

Orba nodded in response, though it did not mean he remembered its face. As Ran mentioned, there *was* a time back when he was still a sword slave that the dragons were brought out and he had ridden on a Baian's back. Thinking back, Fedom came along immediately after and set him up as the prince's double.

"This child here is the best for you. It's gotten attached to you. See? It looks so happy now that Orba's come."

The Baian's eyes glistened and snorted roughly as it incessantly flicked its tongue in and out.

"...I'm not seeing it, as usual."

Orba spoke unconcernedly. Gaining a dragon's affection was the same as being treated as its meal.

"On the other hand, which one would I least likely be able to handle?"

"What are you going to do if I tell you?" Ran said, piqued by his strangely found interest. "Are you going to pin him on your opponent?"

"And what if I were?"

"You coward."

"It's called strategizing."

Orba smiled, revealing his white teeth. He returned to the palace, and once it neared evening, made his way to the stadium once more.

Of course, this time he did so wearing his tiger mask and leather armour.

Tomorrow, the four contenders for the title of Clovis and Felipe would be chosen and they would each hold a one-on-one match against one another. Today, the nobles' seating area was one thirds filled for the battle that could be called the finals qualifiers in the selection of those chosen four.

Just before noon, the emperor Guhl Mephius appeared, having brought along several of his retainers. The emperor was not a man particularly fond of the gladiator games and last year, with the exception of the final round, rarely showed himself. Everyone rumoured that Orba had caught his eye.

And also having caught possibly even more attention than the emperor was the presence of Vileena Owell. Because she had not shown herself in a public sitting until now, the people packed in the venue had temporarily forgotten the game as they gazed at this foreign princess.

Held in between the several matches today would be the coming of age ceremonies.

Amongst the nobles' and commanders' sons aged twelve years and older, four had stepped forward. Rogue Saian's son, Romus, was the youngest at age twelve, but what caught their attention most was Commander Odyne Lorgo's second daughter, Ronnie Lorgo. Indeed, this young girl was strong of heart, appearing completely unscathed by the dragon being brought out towards her.

The Baian's neck was wrapped in chains and muscular soldiers held the chains in both hands. Ronnie lightly hopped onto the dragons back and easily moved the dragon. As she basked in the cheers, she gave a single bow fit for a lady.

Ronnie climbed down the dragon, and smiled at Romus who waited on line. She then whispered something into his ears. From an observer's point of view, she appeared to be encouraging Romus and giving him words of advice.

"I'll praise you for coming here and not running away with your tail between your legs. But it's impossible for you. Before you cry yourself to tears, why don't you go ahead and say you're suffering from stomach cramps?"

But this was what she actually said. These two had shared such a relationship since far back.

In little to no time at all, Romus' turn was up. The soldiers urged him on, but without treading a single step, his gaze turned to search his surroundings.

"Daddy won't be coming to save you," Ronnie said softly.

At that same time, he spotted Hou Ran at the gates where the gladiators entered from. Ran smiled at him and gave a nod. Returning an assertive nod, Romus valiantly walked towards the dragon and jumped on its back.

In doing so, the dragon's body twisted left and right. It may have been a young dragon, but even the slightest of movements was enough to pull along the soldiers holding onto its chains. Even Romus found himself starting to fall off, inducing the crowd to give off cries of horror. However, Romus never lost his calm. He lay sprawled on the dragon's back and placed a hand on the back of the dragon's neck. The dragon let out a low groan, and gradually began to calm down, then it finally began to move its feet. The largest outpour of cheers rained down on Romus on this day.

His parents both heaved a sigh of relief, and Ronnie, far from being angry at having the spotlight stolen from her, stood in incredulous shock.

The coming of age ceremony ended without incident, and so began another series of gladiator matches. They were all gladiators who had won through their battles since the first day, so their skill was undisputed. The stadium shook in anticipation of these high levelled battles.

And indifferent to the wild enthusiasm surrounded her,

"Princess, is Orba-sama's turn still yet to come?" Theresia spoke with a paled face. "Truthfully, I cannot bear to watch. Please tell me when his turn has come. Until then, I will be keeping my eyes closed."

"What in Garbera's name do you think you're saying?"

Vileena's own expression wasn't looking too good. Even now, necks and limbs were sent flying and bloody entrails spewed out beneath them. But Vileena never averted her eyes, only watching motionlessly as she formed two fists above her knees.

Before long, a Baian was reined out from the eastern gate. The matches here on would proceed on dragonback; that is to say, it was just about Orba's turn. For one reason or another, the colour returned to Vileena's face when,

"Princess."

The emperor's page came and kneeled before her.

"His Majesty has extended his invitation to you. If you do not mind, he wishes to enjoy the game together with you. By all means, the person accompanying you is welcome to join as well."

Vileena and Theresia both looked at each other.

"I accept."

She had no reason to refuse. They stood up, and while they walked towards the area the emperor was seated, Theresia pulled at her sleeve and whispered in a hushed voice,

"I'm begging you, please do not bring up the issue of Lord Kaiser when you meet with the emperor. In an arena setting, these gentlemen are more fervid than usual. I fear that a minor mistake could lead to an irreversible situation."

"As I would expect of you, Theresia. You pay careful attention to your surroundings."

She jested lightheartedly, but on meeting the emperor's eyes, she gave a bow while unable to hide the anxiety that appeared across her face. Guhl Mephius prepared a seat beside him for Vileena. And as if right on cue, the names of the two gladiators in the next match were called out and they began to enter the arena.

The masked warrior, Orba, and the gladiator who once earned his share of achievements during the war as a slave in the battlefield, Gash. At the appearance of these two men, whose figures they were already well familiar with, the arena's excitement soared.

"The new hero and the former hero," Guhl Mephius suddenly spoke. "In light of this country's future, I've come to realize one could employ tricks here to prevail as the new hero. However, I will not permit this within the arena. Those who cannot cut open their own path through their own power are not worthy to be called a hero."

Vileena showed no inclination to respond. Guhl then asked,

"Do you favour the gladiator games, princess?"

"I do not," Vileena immediately answered, paying no heed to Theresia's horrified expression. "They are slightly overwhelming. In all honesty, I feel faint from being struck by the smell of blood and surrounding fervour here."

The emperor gave a lighthearted laugh.

“You say the same things Lana would.” He mentioned the previous empress’ name. “The label of savage that other countries have given to Mephius is admittedly true. However, this entertainment is just as necessary to the citizens as the bread that fills their plates. Not only does it foster the emergence of powerful warriors, but it is a must in preserving our militaristic traits. Men assemble under the banner of a strong sword. And because they believe they are protected by a strong sword, they are able to pass their days peacefully. This is something the princess also must have experienced.”

“...”

“Well, peace with Garbera has been established at long last. Next year, I hope to be able to invite many airship pilots from Garbera and engage with them in a racing contest. It is sure to generate a festive mood. I hope to receive the princess’ assistance on its occasion.”

The emperor said half-jokingly. Vileena cast her eyes slightly downwards in contemplation. This emperor gave off the atmosphere of a kind, good-natured old man, yet he surely planned to feed any of his retainers who dared voice an objection against him today to the dragons. She understood this by seeing the various expressions that coloured the statesmen's faces. Although she understood, it was not something she would concede to.

Orba and Gash both stepped into the middle of the ring. Even amongst all the named gladiators gathered in Solon, they were particularly famous. Their names were both repeatedly called out in throat wrenching cries. The emperor surveyed the uproar from start to end. When it subsided, he asked,

“Who do you believe would be more likely to win, Princess?”

“I do not know the peculiarities that lie in the sword. I simply wish for Orba to win.”

“I see. Orba is the sword-slave who infiltrated Zaim Fortress and rescued you. It is not unreasonable for you to want to support him.”

“It might be brazen of me to ask, but who do you believe will win, Your Majesty?”

“That would wholly depend on who the god of fortune smiles upon,” Guhl spoke curtly, “...Is what I would like to say, but that would be discourteous of me. Princess, how about we place a bet? If the princess desires for Orba’s victory, then I shall bet on the gladiator Gash.”

“What are you...”

"There is no need to worry. This will only serve as a friendly wager. Should the princess win, I shall grant you any one of your requests. And if I were to win,"

"...There is nothing I could hope to offer you."

"I would like to be given the honour of naming my grandchild."

Vileena was breathlessly taken aback. That single remark had brought back those distant memories of her grandfather residing in the Garberan royal villa, whom she had been separated from.

What sort of child will you give birth to and raise up?

I would like to see that endearing visage of you cradling the baby in your arms.

The Mephius emperor, Guhl Mephius, and the former Garberan king, Ainn Owell. These two elderly personages, who were as different as the day and night, had been connected through their thoughts of a grandchild.

Vileena remained clueless, not knowing what to say. During this time,

"The two warriors, who now approach death's door, offer up your salutations to His Imperial Majesty!"

In conjunction with the decreed voice, Orba and Gash faced the emperor, and placing one hand on their chest, pointed the spear in their other hand up towards the sky.

Part 2

Two Baians, one size larger than those used in the previous ceremony, were brought out in front of these two men. Their horns glistened and their body brimmed over with energy; these dragons were fully ready for battle.

Orba and Gash moved in opposite directions, severing contact with their eyes. Gash's body was cleanly shaven. Variously coloured tattoos were imprinted throughout his body. It may well have been a trait of those who lived in the remote regions, or possibly done for appeal when he was marketed as a sword-slave. In terms of physique and appearance, he was similar to Verne, whom Orba fought back at Ba Roux. What differed him from Verne was the way he smacked his crimson tongue across his lips. He held a glint of unlevelled cruelty.

Now they would get on dragonback with the Baians This too was likened after the hero Clovis, who fought on the battlefield saddled on a dragon.

Orba had little experience riding a dragon.

What's worse is—

Orba gazed up at the Baian beside him without finishing his thoughts. He was unable to hold back his feelings of unrest thinking about the fight that was about to follow. It wasn't only because he was unfamiliar with riding on a dragon's back. It was because he did not plan *only* to win.

On the signal, both of them saddled onto their Baians. After settling himself onto the saddle, he stuck his feet into the stirrup, and took two different spears from the guard into his hand. The first was a dragon lance, a ten-metre long hilted lance. This lance bolstered a considerable weight, such that while riders readied themselves, the spear would be tucked under their arms and fixed onto the saddle ring to the side. The other spear was an ordinary one, two metres long. And strapped on his other hand was a small buckler.

"Begin!"

In accordance to the command, several sword slaves released the chains wound around the dragons' legs and neck. Orba's Baian gave off a roar that flipped one of the slaves off his feet.

"Charge!"

On the other end, Gash sprawled down against his dragon as it began its charge.

Orba struggled to assert control over his dragon. The Baian stood on its hind legs, and even now was trying to shake him off. Even as Orba tried to rein in his dragon, Gash headed straight for him. No longer having enough time to dodge the assault, Orba decidedly laid his body down and clung tightly to the dragon's back. In an instant, his body suffered a blow as if struck by a giant fist. He could feel his bones cracking beneath his skin, and his clenched molars seemed ready to snap off at any moment.

Naturally, Gash, having initiated the charge, was quick to recover. He whirled up the tip of his dragon lance that had grazed the flank of the dragon carrying Orba, and on distracting Orba, struck with his other spear.

Orba managed to repel it with his shield. His attack foiled, Gash endeavoured to gain one point in his favour. However, his dragon thrashed its body furiously causing him to lose his stance.

"Tch."

His Baian swung its claws and tail, and shook its neck as if it wanted to sink its fangs into the opponent's throat. Orba and Gash both exchanged a blow with their spears. They were in a scenario akin to fighting on a boat floating on a turbulent sea, where the best tactic was to sweep the opponent off his dragon instead of taking the enemy's head. However, this discrepancy came as all but nigh as their lances clashed time and time again. Based on the sole premise that he survived up to now, Gash was greatly skilled. He was also experienced in handling dragons. And the dragon given to him was one 'thoroughly' trained, whereas a single lapse in judgment by Orba would lead to his death.

Orba frantically clung to his Baian regardless and while focusing wholeheartedly on defence,

"That's all you've got?" he barked.

"Gash, killer of a hundred men, you're not fit to don the helmet of Clovis. The people also want you dead. Go fuckin' die and feed yourself to the dragons[7]."

[7] Orba literally tells him to get beaten to a bloody pulp and end up as dragon fodder.

Gash dropped down from above, and he thrust up towards Orba with his spear. Orba received the blow with his shield while his body was being tossed back and forth.

Almost simultaneously, Orba's Baian stretched out its neck. Gash pointed his dragon lance up towards the dragon about to bare its fangs. He waved his lance left and right after the dragon's head.

"Kid," Gash bellowed through his ground teeth. "You say that when you possess only this level of skill? I'll have you eat those words!"

Gash kicked the side of his Baian, and once his dragon had pulled back, made a dash towards a corner of the ring. Blood pulsed violently throughout the muscles of the men and their dragons. Both sides had sustained countless wounds either from the opponent's spear and the dragon's fangs, or possibly both.

By the time Orba realised Gash's intent to charge a second time, he was no longer able to have his dragon give chase. The distance was already a far cry away.

A gulp sank through Orba's throat. Should he take on the next encounter or not?

Everyone in the arena watched in breathless silence, likely bearing that same thought.

Here it comes –

He raised up his dragon lance, and taking a confronting stance, gave a cry loud enough to split his iron mask.

On the other end,

"Eyyaaaa!"

Gash's piercing voice reverberated through the air.

Lying face down, he began his charge. The light sent from the tip of dragon lance struck Orba's Baian in the eye. For a second, the Baian tried to flee and Orba's spear swerved.

"You fell for it!"

Just before the dragons collided a second time, Gash slipped his feet out of his stirrup. Orba, caught in the ensuing collision, was knocked off his dragon.

His back slammed against the ground. Gashed furiously swooped down on Orba, who for a moment lay limp like a lifeless doll.

Orba rolled on the hard ground and dodged it by a hair's breadth. He quickly lifted his body up.

However, there was no weapon in Orba's hands. He was still disoriented from the collision.

The dragons violently pit against one another behind him. Gash repeatedly delivered a series of attacks, under the veil of the clouds of dust.

Within the nobles' seating area, Vileena instinctively averted her eyes.

Though he wore a mask, it was possible to tell he was still dazed. His movements also appeared unsteady. Driven by a sudden impulse and forgetting she sat beside the emperor, Vileena's mouth gaped open. As Gash's spear was about to pierce through his mask,

"Orba!"

A voice roared down like thunder, projecting below the seating area and away from the gates.

Orba instantly opened his eyes and in a series of nimble movements, provokingly circled around the pursuing Gash. With each thrust of the spear, a blast of air struck against Orba's mask. Blood ran down his neck and shoulders.

Soon after, Orba's feet came to a halt. Seeing this chance, Gash diagonally lunged from a predictable location. It was easy to see through his projected path. Orba dodged his lunge, and while taking hold of the extended arm, kicked him in the knee and threw him forward.

It was already impossible to tell which dragon belonged to whom, but one of them had finally pinned down the other and was about to bite into it from above. The pinned down Baian struggled to push off the dragon and swung its tail, striking Gash in the chest.

Coughing up a spurt of blood, this time Gash was the one to stagger backwards. His variously coloured tattoos were dyed in a bloody red.

Orba picked up the spear that Gash had dropped on the ground. And showing no hesitation, he performed a single thrust into the heart.

A chill ran through Orba as he felt the spear make its mark. Blood splashed his mask as he pulled the spear out. For a short time, he stood still in silence, not wiping off the steaming blood off his mask.

The people encircled around the ring clapped their hands and stamped their feet, whilst Vileena collapsed onto her chair and heaved a big sigh of relief. She didn't notice her breathing had stopped until just now.

"Vileena-sama, it's about time you let go of my hand."

Theresia said. She had unconsciously squeezed Theresia's hand. Coming back to her senses, Vileena did as told, and saw a distinct red outline where she had been holding.

"It appears to be the princess' win."

As he said this, the emperor stood up from his seat. Reassuring the frantic princess who also attempted to stand up to see him off, he said,

"Should you find something you desire, do not hesitate to say so. A Mephius emperor does not stray from an agreement."

From a seat facing opposite them, "Oh?" Noue let out this single remark. He was not the least impressed by the situation at hand. Though he claimed himself an avid captive of the gladiator games when he spoke with Simon, he was a man who did not hold interest in anything except the art of conquest and warfare—or to be more precise, held no interest in anything where he could not employ his resourcefulness.

So his name was Gash. I'm fairly certain he was invited to participate in the plan...Well, no matter. It's not as if I require them to be skilful. With so much as the discharge of rebellion, the pus[8] collected within Mephius will catch fire and spread undeterred."

However—Noue's worries turned towards a different direction. Prince Gil was not present amongst the nobles in the seating area opposite him. He had gone as far as come to Mephius to learn more about Gil. However, it was impossible even for Noue and his foresight to draw upon these fragments of knowledge with his seldom encounters with Gil. But that no longer mattered now. As long things went the way he imagined them and produced the results he desired here in the lands of this foreign country, it would attest that his ability of foresight had not rusted. As a result, Noue had lost most of his interest in Gil.

[8] Pus here symbolizes the wounds inflicted onto Mephius caused under poor rule.

As Orba made his way back to the gate, he passed by Pashir, who would be participating in the following match. Compared to last time, their positions now reversed. Moving forward in an unsteady gait, right before their shoulders met,

"Why?"

Orba asked.

"Why did you call out my name?"

"Ho? So you heard it." Without slowing his pace, he continued, "Then it looks like I've successfully returned the favour."

"Favour?"

"Not to you. To the one you serve, the prince."

Not saying another word, Pashir headed in the direction where his battle would take place.

Pashir and the warrior who more or less won through all the matches unharmed would similarly, face off in a battle on dragonback. Being a veteran warrior, it wasn't surprising he was skilled in riding a dragon. On the second assault, he pierced the enemy Baian, and walking along the dragon that now tumbled over, he approached the warrior who had fallen off his dragon and finished him.

With this, the names of the four gladiators participating in the final decisive battle were decided. They became the targets of bets, and not only within the arena, but all throughout Solon, "He's going to win," "No, *he's* going to win". Why they believed so was because these were the best of the best. They engaged others who like-mindedly held their own one-sided opinions.

And so, the final gladiator game of the day had concluded, and within the arena, Kaiser Islan's execution took place as scheduled. Vileena of course, could not bear to watch, and immediately took her leave accompanied by Theresia. Practically none of the Mephians thought to return home, likely finding even that entertaining.

"If,"

As she was leaving, Vileena voiced her thoughts.

"*If* I had told the emperor to rescind the order for Kaiser's execution as the receiving end of my wager at that time, what do you suppose the emperor would have done?"

"Even thinking about it terrifies me, princess."

Considering her mistress, anything could have happened. Theresia trembled at the thought.

The figures of men and women dispersed, and evening welcomed the arena. It was covered in a silence that almost made the afternoon uproar seem like a lie. Burned a deep red by the setting sun, blood and organs lingered on the stadium grounds, their distinctive smell hovering in the air. In such a place, Prince Gil Mephius appeared for the second time. He pushed past the flustered supervisor and continued to walk in heavy steps.

Right then, he came across Orba, who had taken no more than a single step out of the infirmary. The impact from the Baian's charge had caused injuries throughout his body, and his walking was also unsteady. Gil and Orba's feet stopped in front of the other gladiators, who now watched quietly.

"Is there something you have to say for yourself, Orba?"

Orba—rather, the masked warrior did not give offer any response to Gil's words.

"You not only had trouble with someone like Gash, but as one in the glorious Mephius Imperial Guards, you *dared* to handle your dragon more clumsily than a sword-slave? It would've been better off if the dragon'd eaten you."

"You must be thrilled now that you've shamed me."

The prince grabbed hold of the iron mask and shook it. The swordsman did not attempt to put up any resistance, but also did not avert the gaze through his mask away from the prince.

"What's with those eyes?"

He snatched a whip from a nearby guard, and suddenly beat the masked swordsman with it. The mantle the masked swordsman wore tore, and immediately after he let out a groan, he was lashed out at once more.

"I can't stand the way you look at me with those filthy eyes...when you're nothing more than a piece of livestock in my keeping!"

Gil kicked the swordsman in the face, and then forcibly pulled him up. "Come!" He gripped his arm and pulled him along. The slaves wordlessly saw them off, as Gil pulled the swordsman to a place where no eyes lurked, and finally let go of the hand.

"That was cruel of you, Orba."

The swordsman spoke in a pained voice. Of course, Prince Gil being the aforementioned Orba, the one hidden behind the mask could not be him. It was the gladiator who bore a similar physique to him, Kain.

"I went easy on you, you know."

You say it's cruel, but it's even crueller for me.

The one who received treatment in the infirmary was none other than Orba. In addition to injuring his back and waist when the dragons collided, he banged his shoulders when he fell of his dragon. It was fortunate his body didn't suffer from any debilitating injuries, but he could hardly be said to be in perfect condition for tomorrow's match. Swinging the whip alone was enough to send pain running throughout his body.

"I'm fine with becoming the masked swordsman Orba, but could I ask for an easier job next time?"

"I'll give it some thought."

Orba received the headpiece and leather armour from Kain, and returned to the form of a masked gladiator a second time. He threw the whip in his hand at Kain.

"Should I bring this back?"

"No. Use that to hit me."

"Eh, that's all right. I don't hate you that much."

"You idiot," Orba wryly smiled. "I need lash marks."

Kain timidly complied. He had previously took on, and furthermore, acted out the role of the prince's body double. At that time, Orba came in contact with Kain as Prince Gil and did not reveal his true identity. But this time, he felt it a necessity, and exposed his face bare.

"I knew you were mysterious, but I would've never imagined you were the prince. Could it really be 'that'? You were confined by an adversary and they forcibly put that iron mask on you. Then you were stripped to the status of a slave. You heroically survived through the ordeals, and now you're about to take back the country that rightfully belongs to you. Well isn't this a tale to behold!"

Or so Kain would melodramatise, making it a mystery to Orba just how much of the situation he understood.

Tch. Damn you, Kain.

After finishing his preparations, Orba leaned a hand against the wall, and walked in shambles. Half of it was an act, but the other half was real. The first two lashes, Kain held back, but Orba pressed him, "Do it harder!" and the next lash was sent with all of his strength. Deep marks that took on the shape of a worm were etched on his arms, legs, and back. Fresh blood dripped from his neck.

Orba walked up to where sword-slaves were present, then tumbled over. It was a miserable act, but he could not afford to nitpick. There, a hand suddenly extended out. He grabbed the hand and pulled himself up. It was none other than Pashir.

"Do you still intend on being the prince's dog after suffering such treatment?"

His voice was calm, but his face twisted in anger.

"Who knows?"

He answered indifferently, while convinced Pashir had been caught in his net. To that end, he had specifically chosen a difficult to handle Baian, and assigned Gash a Baian trained for military use.

"You might be praised as a hero now, but you're expendable. You should already know that."

"What would you bloody know?" Orba glared at him, coughing up blood onto the ground. "That's right, I'm a slave. As an imperial guard, I ultimately have no choice but to kill on command. Besides that, what else is there? Are you going to tell me that you, with that prided sword-wielding arm of yours, will destroy Mephius, will destroy this fuckin' country this instant?"

Pashir stared at Orba's burning eyes for some time, at a loss for words.

Part 3

That evening, Pashir seated beside Orba in the dining area. In the presence of the slave girl introduced as Mira who waited on them, Pashir mumbled on about his past.

He grew up in a western Mephian village and lost both his parents early on. In order to feed himself and his younger sister, his last remaining family member, he chose to work at a nearby mine. The working conditions were far from good and few measures were taken to guarantee their safety. Deaths were frequently tolled from overwork and cave-ins. No matter how many times they protested, they saw no improvement. The driving reason was because they saw the workers as little more than slaves.

Even then, it was a highly sought after job. Pashir quietly continued to work.

“Why was I born? What was I able to do? I never paid them a single thought. I was alive. That was all that mattered.”

Pashir said. Hearing nothing but the mumbles of fellow slaves, Orba could once more feel himself returning to his time as a slave.

Once, there was an incident that even trampled upon that meagre wish of Pashir’s. His sister, after procuring meat in the marketplace, showed up at the mines Pashir worked at. The person she asked for her brother's whereabouts was a bad one. He was a slave supervisor known for his lust.

He made up a lie and said that Pashir had committed an atrocious wrong. He then brought the younger sister indoors, where he proceeded to ravish her.

“I happened to pass by there, whether by some stroke of fortune by the Dragon God, or some terrible prank played by some evil unnamed god.”

His resentment having built up, Pashir immediately flew into a rage and beat the supervisor to death. It wasn’t too surprising Pashir was then restrained and sold off as a sword slave. It had been five years since then. He moved from arena to arena and survived them.

Strong-armed Pashir

Orba finally recalled that name. He was a veteran warrior, and also a sword-slave who would never be forgiven for his crimes. Like Orba, he had a plain fighting style. He did not adorn his body with any showy ornaments, nor did he try to adopt a gaudy personality. He fought plainly and won. That was why his name hadn’t spread far.

But those kinds of people are the strongest.

“It might be word of the mouth,” Pashir drank up the cold, tasteless soup and then expressionlessly continued, “but I’ve heard my younger sister has also been made a

slave. Of course, I don't know her whereabouts. There's no way I could hope to know. I curse Mephius. I swear to bring Mephius to ruins. Supposing even if I die halfway, my soul will take over the one who killed me and I'll make sure all of Mephius gets what they deserve."

"..."

"The same goes for me. The hundreds of sword-slaves I've killed; their souls all cling onto mine. All day, all night, they whisper to me. 'Kill the Mephians. Roast the nobles. Take back everything they've stolen from us. That is the mission imposed on you, the one who killed us.'"

Armed soldiers were situated in all four corners of the eating chamber. Orba paid them no heed.

"But with the way things are, nothing will change; only that the number of souls clinging on top of your shoulders will increase."

"Exactly. If things continue the way they do, at least."

Pashir was young and held the status of a sword slave, but he commanded a presence far heavier than any Mephius commander Orba had seen.

Afterwards, Orba also spoke of his own past. It was a past he did not want to mention. But to earn his trust, he had no choice in the matter. There was no need to exaggerate what really happened, nor put up an act. All of it was Orba's truth. It was the truth, one Orba deemed he had to mention to deceive Pashir. He spoke of how the Mephius army burned his village, of how they stole his family away from it. As he spoke, his hands trembled. His body trembled. Oubary's face came to mind. Oubary was within his reach, yet why had his chances of killing that bastard constantly escaped him? The answer was obvious. Because it was obvious, he needed to pretend it wasn't. A man with the same circumstances. A man who bore the same resentment. A man who also consoled in him.

Before he knew it, Pashir's hand rested on his shoulders. "What are you—" his mouth closed as he halfway muttered these words. He currently felt extremely sad for some reason. More than anger, he was overwhelmed in a pool of grief. Orba laid down his head and leaned his body against Pashir's shoulder.

"Sorry for calling you a dog. You're also the same as me. A gladiator burdened by their souls."

Pashir then stared into Orba's eyes. In a voice far more hushed than ever before,

"I've got something interesting to tell you. With those feelings, I'm sure you'll become one of us."

Here it comes.

Orba never felt more grateful to his iron mask than now. The sentiments that arose within him in that instant parted in a flash, replaced by the tension and temperament of a warrior now seeping out of him.

"What are you talking about?"

He tried to ask doubtfully. The surrounding sword-slaves were watching him with dagger glares. Pashir directed his gaze towards them. As if to end the silence, a few of them quietly nodded.

This made it clear they respected Pashir as their leader.

Pashir slowly revealed the plan to Orba. Of course, they took caution to lower their voices so the acting guards of the detention camp would not be able to hear them.

Who would've thought...

Orba thought as he listened on. It wasn't something Orba hadn't already considered, but this plan wasn't exactly bold, nor was it very endangering.

Pashir planned to make use of the tournament and have the sword-slaves rise in rebellion.

They would rise to action the day after tomorrow, once the deciding match tomorrow ended and the victorious two to lead the two hundred slaves in a battle against the dragons were decided. On the climax of the festival, the seats of the imperial family and the senior statesmen would be fully occupied. The objective was to take them hostage.

"A sword will be handed to each of the slaves to eliminate the dragons. The surrounding guards will, of course, be watching over us carrying guns, but other than these two hundred slaves on the stadium ground, there are seventy or more gladiators who had previously participated in a match. The first move will be for them to raise an uproar and split the palace guards in half. There will be slaves attending to the services of the nobles and the affluential in the seating stand. I've brought some certain individuals amongst them over to our side. They will incite the other slaves."

A grandiose plan. It was hard to say whether this plan would succeed or not, and even supposing it were to succeed, a great number of casualties would result. Not only the slaves and the nobles, but also the Mephians situated within the seating stand would likely end up caught in between.

"Will you do it?"

Pashir asked only this. Orba was aware the question held several implied meanings. If he didn't agree, he'd likely be killed here in this place. His corpse might end up as dragon fodder, or be thrown into the incinerator found in the arena, each as likely to happen as the next. Orba spoke up.

"I have one condition."

"What is it?"

Anxiety suddenly ran through him. A menacing gleam lodged within the surrounding slaves' eyes.

"Let me kill the prince, Gil, with my own hands."

After mentioning this, Pashir instantly bent his back. He burst out in laughter. To give his response, Pashir put his thick hand on Orba's shoulder.

"That sits fine with me." Pashir flashed his white teeth at the slaves. "He's your prey. Do whatever you want with him."

The slaves barely slept that night. They lay sprawled in a manner that didn't arouse any suspicion from the guards, and as they pretended to snore, talked about the plan that would occur two days from now and joked of what would happen in the future to come. There were those who boasted how they would capture the nobles and make them take part in the arena. There were also those who thought of breaking into the nobles' homes and quickly making a fortune. And there were those who insisted that they should set fire to Solon in order to issue a manifesto to all the slaves. But the majority of them, not too surprisingly, wanted to return to their hometown.

"There's no place left for me to return to,"

A middle-aged slave said with a weak smile.

"Over twenty years have passed since I was made a slave. My mother was already getting old then, and now I'll bet she's long gone. I don't even know if my village is still there or not."

Even then, they insisted on returning. There might be nothing and no one there, but they still remembered their village. Clear in his mind was the figure of himself perched atop a rock, looking up at the sky. “I’ve come back!” Not as a slave made to kill others in public, but as a human being.

“Pashir, what will you do?”

One of the slaves asked. After thinking it over a bit, Pashir replied,

“Come to think of it, I haven’t really given it much thought.”

He said while forcing a smile. Another slave teasingly chimed in.

“Aren’t you going to be taking Mira with you?”

“What, how did it come to that?”

“Anyone’d think that after seeing you two. After we break free, that Agon chap might just take her away, you know?”

Everyone let out a snigger. Pashir turned the other way. They weren’t sure how long it’d been since they had been taken to the detention camp, but in these past few days, Mira and Pashir seemed to have gotten fairly intimate in their eyes.

While watching the lively scene before him, Orba being Orba thought of different matter. He had never heard the names ‘Oubary’ or ‘Noue’ amongst those taking part in the rebellion. Most likely, the instigator that taught Pashir and the slaves this plan never mentioned these two’s names.

What does he hope to gain out of making the sword-slaves act out a rebellion?

The same was for Princess Vileena.

The timely assassination of Vileena in the midst of the confusion; that would clear Garbera of suspicion, but what would Noue gain from sacrificing the princess’ life?

Orba cursed at himself for knowing nothing. If he were slightly more knowledgeable about international affairs, he would at least be able to draw some clues as to what Garbera, and more importantly, Noue could hope to gain from bringing disorder to Mephius.

This was different from a simple fight where he just picked up a sword and fought only to survive. Many motives were entwined, and a vast knowledge of affairs was required. The same went for war and politics.

Pashir returned to his serious face.

"After the final match, the emperor will personally hand out the golden helmet of Clovis. But that won't be the time to make our move yet, Orba. Killing the emperor alone won't grant the slaves freedom."

The motion to assassinate the emperor at that time as the first phase of the plan had been considered. Though of course, even the victor would have his weapon confiscated during this occasion, and the slaves wouldn't exactly be in the position to move. And the emperor would be surrounded by soldiers armed with bayonets. The success rate was never high to start with, and even supposing they killed the emperor, while it might strike a big blow to Mephius, it would only serve to meaninglessly strengthen oppression against the slaves.

However—

Supposing then, the uprising successfully went according to plan, what would ultimately become of the slaves?

Orba might not have voiced it out, but his chest seethed with anger.

It's fine to go back to your hometown. It's fine to kill the nobles. But then what? What will happen to Mephius and the people living in it?

Orba's anger wasn't directed towards the slaves. Noue, Oubary, Zaat—it was towards these devious characters and also one other, whom was unable to fully share the slaves' feelings of anger because of his position—himself.

There's bound to be lots of casualties. I'm worried the provincial lords, in fear of the slaves' uprising, will slaughter those leading them.

What was he thinking and who was he thinking as? Orba's mind was a wreck.

At any rate,

A portion of Noue's laid out plans was now in his hands. It was for this sole purpose that Orba returned to being a sword-slave a second time. He had also stained his sword in blood.

I'll have you pay me back duly.

Orba returned to the palace well after the break of dawn.

It being a time of the festival, the guards pleasantly greeted the prince. No one made mention of his illness or anything of the sort.

It had been a while since he stayed awake all throughout the night, but Orba was wide awake. He couldn't forget the figures of the sword-slaves at the detention camp. Amidst their dirt and grime-covered faces, their eyes shone profusely. The majority of those slaves did not speak of the future. They did not know whether they would live to see tomorrow. It was pointless even if they thought about it. And despite this, the sword slaves that gathered around Pashir all looked towards the future together. Though that being the case, it wasn't as if they foolishly bet everything onto this plan. Rather, the thought of not knowing whether they would die the next day weighed on them more than anything.

And yet, they were willing to shed their blood, break their bones, and give up their life for this future that until now, they could never hope to have. What would they do if they found out they were being strung along?

Fuckin' hell!

Orba felt an urge to kick the wall. Would it be better if he were only nothing but a gladiator? Then he would have burned the plan onto his body with awakened interest, embrace his overflowing anger and eagerly fight against Mephius without giving a second thought. However, the current Orba was not so. In exchange for his iron mask, he had obtained the mask of Gil Mephius. To protect this mask that possessed the authority to help him retrieve the many things he'd lost, he would unfortunately need to protect Mephius.

"Your highness."

Dinn greeted Orba in his room as he was deep in thought.

"I'm going to take a nap." At hearing Orba's unexpected announcement, Dinn's eyes widened.

"Please wait, your highness. Vileena-sama has entrusted something to you."

"Entrusted something? So she came here again? Did you manage to deceive her this time?"

"No, it was Theresia who had brought this along with a message from the princess."

What Theresia presented was a golden medal wrapped in cloth. The medal was fastened to a thin chain, and seemed meant to be worn around the neck.

It was once a customary practice amongst the Garberan royalty to award those who performed distinguished war services or other meritorious deeds. The medal was said to bestow the name of camaraderie to its holder, and be given to loyal friends

and subordinates. It had primarily evolved into something royalty still in their adolescence and the sons and daughters of nobles gave to their retainers in half jest.

Inscribed on the centre of the coin was Garbera's national emblem of a horse and a sword, and also inscribed was Vileena's name, a gesture that implied proof of their 'unyielding and everlasting friendship'.

"'Please give this to Orba-sama'—she said."

"To Orba? Not to *me*?"

"Like I said, to *you*."

Oh, Orba finally registered. Orba intended to face Dinn wearing the mask of Prince Gil, but the situation had produced a moment of confusion.

The medal had a diameter of five centimetres, and didn't seem likely to hinder him even if he wore it under his clothes.

Orba is a dear friend

Those words rang in his ears. It was, at the very least, proof of Vileena's friendship with he who tread near death's door.

After changing into the clothes Dinn brought to him, he threw himself onto the bed. His body was fatigued, but he had a considerably hard time falling asleep. Though he understood a significant portion of the enemy's plans, there were so many parts still veiled that he couldn't easily make a move.

Getting a feel for the enemy's moves and taking over their plan from the beginning was the safer way. Furthermore, it would enclose on the enemy's guarded measures, and contain their next move.

However, it was a fact that it would bring about many casualties as a result. If the sword-slaves were to rise in rebellion simultaneously with the slaves within the stadium grounds, the number of deaths would be nothing to make light of. What was he to do? Should he execute the plan as a gladiator and keep the damage to a minimum?

Orba brooded over his alternatives, finally falling into slumber.

Winding the clock back a bit, it was around the time Orba was at the detention camp listening to Pashir's stories of the past.

Tomorrow, the time when the gladiator tournament reached its climax, would be welcomed by the boisterous citizens celebrating the festive mood and oppositely, the sullen faces of those tormented in agony.

On the western edge of Solon was a mid-sized parade ground. It served as both the point of arrival and departure for air carriers. There lay a one hundred and fifty metre tall tower whose top floor was used as an aircraft dock. The occasion was a naval review—in other words, an air parade. Watching the ships take off to the sky was also a sight of grandeur. In addition, some tens would be selected from amongst the people to board a cruiser and observe the assembly of formation of a fleet from the sky. This matched the battle against the dragons taking place in the arena as the centrepiece on the final day.

Of course, even the docking area had undergone strenuous preparations before the festival. The mechanics and the slaves that were charged with supporting them through labour and menial tasks worked tirelessly without sleep or rest, and some twenty slaves had collapsed. And to show the fruits of their labour, the dock was now decorated with air carriers lined neatly against one another.

However, a problem arose before the awaited day of the parade as they performed their final check. When they checked the ether emission firsthand when doing a trial run for flight functionality, the air carrier gave no response. The one with the problem was the Solon garrison flagship that would be placed in a key position on the parade two days from now.

The mechanics were urgently called back from the festival and quickly performed an inspection, then switched to repairs. However, whatever the problem was, it did not seem they would fix it until the beginning of the parade. Presently, the dock within Solon was cluttered with ships, and while it may be called a parade, civilian ships were lent out for money so as to increase a province's fleet size in every way possible. The fleets of the other provinces were in no way inferior by means of appearance—Mephius was after all, a country that did not have many dragonstone ships in its possession—and they currently had no ship capable of filling in the vacant space left by the flagship.

There, perchance a man of character happened to come see the ships. He was the commanding officer of the Blue Archery Division comprised of soldiers under Lord Zaat, Gary Lynwood. He held the qualifications of a Winged Dragon Officer, and was expected to have his own fleet of air carriers within the Blue Archery Division at some point in the future, or at the very least, be suitably promoted and given command his own air carrier and unit and ascend to an important position.

"You've come right when we need you."

On hearing the mechanics' troubles, a joyous countenance spread across his usually long, drowsy face.

"In a base stationed between Solon and Idoro my unit plundered from Garbera during the war is a dragonstone ship. In order to study their technology, we repaired it and kept it intact. Our Blue Archery Division had wanted a ship, so we turned it into a Mephian one—mainly in appearance—and also refurnished it. I'll bring it here. Considering the time now, I'll have it over late into the night if you won't mind."

The mechanics expressed their deepest gratitude. They couldn't even begin to imagine what punishment might be handed down to them if the parade were to suffer a setback.

Normally, no one was allowed into the air carriers within the district of Solon, with the exception of the garrison guards. This was thoroughly reinforced without exception and until the day of the festival when the parade came to a close, they would not be able to return to their bases. Naturally, security both in and outside of the dock was strict. Late into the night, the guards took turns to keep a lookout even when Gary brought over the arranged ship.

Although that was the case, their guard duty likely never entailed them meeting any suspicious individuals or catching any intruders, for they only stood watch and never bothered going *inside* the ships. They were completely unaware that Gary, known as the Thunderclap, and the outstanding members of the Blue Archery Division waited in anticipation, nor that someone had arranged for the garrison's flagship sabotage and that the one to do the deed had been a former mechanic posing as a slave.

Chapter 6: Those Who Carry the Brand

Part 1

The day of the final match. It had been all the talk since morning.

The Gladiator's Guild had announced the pairings. Orba and Pashir would not directly confront. That was the one thing the people found most regrettable.

"When it comes to speed, then it has to be Orba. Pashir's slow as an ox. Honestly, if those two duked it out, the battle would be settled in an instant."

"That's not true, Pashir doesn't make any useless movements. He's different from Orba who continually moves around. Those little clever tactics of Orba's won't work against him. If the fight is drawn out even a little, Orba would run out of stamina and be at an overwhelming disadvantage."

At the street corners, in front of food stalls, within party venues, people argued back and forth about the gladiator match. This wasn't limited only to the citizens of Solon, but also included the nobles. They would engage in heated debates over who would survive, betting horses, unusual paintings, or even ten slave girls, busying themselves in wagers that flaunted their status.

Amongst the heated debates posed the question that, supposing Orba and Pashir expectantly survived, which of them would receive the honour as the dragon-slaying hero Clovis?

"If it were His Imperial Majesty," one such noble suddenly spoke with a pompous air, "I believe he would likely want Orba to inherit the title of Clovis. After all, he is the hero who defeated Ryucown. If he were to win this and the image of him being a former slave stamped out, it goes without saying he will have earned the title of corporal or captain. He might even be given the whole Solon garrison company!"

And as the time approached the evening juncture that held the deciding match, the emperor himself made his appearance, as to personally hand over the golden helmet to the victor. The Imperial Guards and slaves that accompanied the emperor, totalling roughly some thirty men, occupied the upper half of the grandstand.

The figures of the imperial princess Ineli and her friends, as well as Garbera's princess, Vileena, and her head maid, Theresia, were also present.

In the grand stadium, several battles were taking place. Once a pair finished, another pair would be sent in to fill the vacant spot, and so these battles went on without end. However, as the strength of the blazing sun waned, the vacant seats throughout the stadium began to slowly stand out.

By evening, the final battle ended. The sounds of the gladiators and their clashing weapons below suddenly came to a dead silence, and conversely, the enthusiasm of the crowd knew no end as their roars resounded like a tidal wave.

After a short intermission that held them further in suspense, the four swordsmen who fought fiercely through their battles and won made their appearance, each armed with a weapon of their choosing. One carried a long spear, another stood ready with a battle axe, and Orba carried his usual longsword.

So it's finally time.

Orba murmured to himself, resting his sword on the back of his shoulders. He may have thrown himself into the gladiator ring, but it wasn't as if he wanted to, and it was now finally coming to an end. Next would be to use what he heard from Pashir about the plan to corner Noue and Oubary and obstruct the scheme Zaat was assisting them in.

Right now, they were likely watching the scene unfold from above, enjoying the spectacle of the slaves killing one another from their safe haven.

Once I end 'this', you guys are next.

He was fired up, different from how he usually was.

The orator called out their four names, and then saluted the emperor. The four men also did the same, and the emperor lowered his chin to face them. At the same time, one of the accompanying Imperial Guards presented to him the golden helmet with both his hands. A pair of wings were attached on the left and right, the mark of the hero Clovis.

That was the signal to start. The ground shook as the arena erupted in pandemonium and the battles began.

Orba's opponent was a giant exceeding two metres in height. To add to that, he wielded a long spear. With a difference in reach that made him hesitant to take even a single step forward, Orba was quickly cornered. Not to mention, he had sustained injuries from his battle with Gash.

Before the end of the third thrust, Orba had fallen backwards. The arena went into a stir. The giant thrust his spear down. Orba rolled sideways towards the giant's flank, and jumping upwards, slashed at him. Blood gushed out from the giant's neck the moment Orba's feet touched the ground. Orba's single slash was well-aimed and cut open his opponent's artery.

The giant crashed onto the ground. And in little time, Pashir settled his match as well. His victory was more clear cut. Just when he appeared to put some distance between himself and the axe-wielding man, he flung his sword over his shoulders and threw it with all his might. The sword hit spot-on and pierced the enemy's heart.

Silence dawned on the five thousand spectators for a brief moment. Not even a minute had passed since the battles began. Her hands wrapped in prayer, Vileena exclaimed a breath of relief.

"It seems they weren't a match," the emperor, Guhl Mephius, muttered absentmindedly. He blinked his eyes with unmistakable signs of boredom and spoke to his wife seated beside him.

"Neither were fit to be their opponents. What do you think, Melissa? Don't you want to see a battle between real men?"

The empress replied in modest moderation, a manner befitting her age and betraying her appearance. "Yes, I would," she assented in honesty. The emperor lowered his chin.

"It would be upsetting to have it end like this. Pashir and Orba; these two shall now contest. Until the match ends in victory or defeat, the handing over of Clovis' helmet will be put on hold."

Those seated in the surroundings all looked up at the emperor in shock.

On hearing this, the arena rose into a commotion, and soon roused in agreement. They were also not satisfied with the amount of bloodshed, and most of all, wanted to know which of them was truly stronger.

What?!

At the shock of the sudden turn of events, Orba instinctively glared up at the emperor. The sword in his hand smelled immensely of blood. And now he would have to stain it with even more blood. The blood of none other than Pashir. The muscles on his arm throbbed.

On the other side,

"Please wait, your majesty," Simon said as he stood up. "This differs from our annual custom. There exists no other reason for this tournament than to single out the select two swordsmen."

"Do not fret over the details, Simon." The emperor pointed towards the ring. "Honestly, I am unable to determine which of the two is more suited to inherit the title of Clovis. To have them fight and hand the golden helmet over to the winner—there's no method more decisive than this. Should the loser die, we can have the Guild choose someone fit to act out his aide, Felipe."

Seated beside Simon, who now stood speechless, Fedom was panting heavily. Each time he was about to get up and suggest a proposition, he would find himself slumping backwards onto his chair on reconsideration. The emperor grew more and

more self-righteous each passing day. He was like a naked blade that would cut Fedom to pieces if he did not tread carefully.

"Orba and Pashir! Both of you, return to the front of the gates!" A soldier commanded them.

"Tch."

Orba spat out. His insides felt like they were on fire.

It's always like this. They control people's lives and fates without a second thought.

"Hah, that was a something to see."

Pashir said. By 'something to see', he likely meant the act of him spitting out through his mask. Pashir wasn't the least daunted at how things ended up.

"Are you going to listen them?"

"The emperor said it. No one can go against that. You'd best ready yourself."

Saying this, Pashir turned his back to Orba. His branded back heaved up and down. Orba called him to a stop in a hurry.

"Wait, Pashir."

"I may be the leader of the rebellion for the time being, but it can't be stopped even if someone tries to put a dent on it. So don't hold yourself back. Let's fight to kill to our heart's content. This'll be our final gladiator match."

"Pashir."

A stadium slave ran up to Pashir and interrupted them, and while wiping away his sweat and pretending to look after him, spoke in a low voice.

"What if you two put up an act? Orba is popular amongst the citizens. It should be fine if you fight normally and then have Orba drop his sword in surrender to you. The people should spare Orba's life."

"That won't work," Pashir shook his head, "The people of Solon are used to seeing arena battles, and will immediately see through any concern for the opponent's life during the match. We can't have them becoming suspicious of the slaves' relationships now. You already know it. We've no choice but to kill each other."

"—"

Orba silently lowered his head. His motives differed from Pashir's, but Orba also harboured a motive no one could ever imagine. Noue, Oubary, and Zaat...not a single one of their actions were to be trusted.

"Let's swear on it," Pashir spoke as a matter-of-factly, "No matter who wins, he'll carry the weight of these souls. Even if you die, I'll take on your feelings. I swear to have Gil Mephius' head. And if I die, you'll take on my feelings; free all the slaves and burn Mephius to the ground."

At those words, Orba felt a lump in his throat and was unable to give an immediate reply.

Take on his feelings...

It went without saying that Orba hated Mephius. How he dreamed countlessly of cutting off the necks of those nobles with the swing of his sword by his own hands. However,

"Yeah..."

Orba said while nodding, in a voice that seemed like another person's.

The two parted and moved towards the east and west gates. The slave called Mira wiped off his sweat and replaced his sword with a new one. Her face was pale and unsteady. Even though he had only met her two or three times, it was clear to Orba that she held feelings for Pashir. Orba tried to open his mouth, but he couldn't think of anything to say. She wished for Pashir to win. That meant Orba's defeat—and his death. And that sat fine with him. Orba also held his own reasons for surviving, even if it meant defeating—killing Pashir.

Is it really fine like this?

Such a thought tore at his chest. Orba shook his masked face. It wasn't fine. Why was he hesitating now? Yes, he bore a hatred towards Mephius similar to Orba's or one that might even have exceeded his, and Pashir's goal resembled his own; in the not too distant future, they would surely stand side by side and fight as comrades.

Damnit! Don't think too much into it.

He grasped the handle of his sword with renewed vigour. To make matters worse, Orba was covered in wounds. Even the battle just now took what little of all his

remaining strength. How many more times would he have to wield his sword to his limits? Orba hadn't the faintest idea.

Victory seemed to get further and further beyond his grasp. His blade would never reach his target if he thought of the things to come while swinging his sword.

I'll end it in a single blow.

Orba decided. He would swing with his full strength one time, when he saw a surefire gap. Failing meant death.

"To the east, Iron Tiger Orba! To the west, Strong-armed Pashir!"

The two called names approached each other in the centre of the arena.

"What could be the meaning of this? Did that not end it?"

Vileena breathlessly watched in suspense at the sudden development. The crowd's cheers were tremendous, such that they rendered Theresia's voice inaudible. However, a brief exchange of glances, and she was able to calmly understand what she was saying. In the midst of this frenzy, a strange tranquillity drifted between the two who were about to kill each other.

"Start!"

Both parties swung their swords into a clash and then jumped back in retreat.

Solon's grand gladiator tournament; here, the fight to determine the strongest man commenced.

It was a fight unprecedented in the long history of Mephius' gladiator fights.

As soon as the match began, the one to charge forward was Orba. He ran straight for Pashir with the tip of his sword skimming along the ground. Pashir bent his knees in preparation. Orba immediately kicked off the ground to Pashir's side. Faster than his opponent could react, he jumped once more. Orba planned to settle the match in this instant. Pashir's legs, arms or back—he would jump in at any gap in defence he saw and finish Pashir off before he could recover.

However, Pashir stopped following Orba with his eyes and immediately rolled forward. Getting up in no time at all, he turned around and swung his sword. Orba pursued after him, but the swing prevented him from advancing further. Orba received the blade with his own and jumped back.

Their unending exchange of blows since the beginning made everyone in the arena to go wild with excitement.

And then they approached a standstill, by the very definition of its meaning. The two ceased all movement, making their previous fast exchange of blows seem like a lie.

Orba stood as he always did, with his bent back eyeing Pashir's every move. The arm that caught Pashir's attack had gone numb. A bead of sweat trickled down under his mask. It was fair to say his initial movements had drained him of the majority of his stamina. He had pushed for a short, decisive battle, but Pashir had completely seen through his movements.

Come, Pashir! Come, come, come!

It was dangerous for him to move. Pashir stood with both his massive legs entrenched on the ground, blood pulsing through their muscles, ready to crush him at a moment's notice. Jumping in would be his last, and he would easily have his attack turned on him.

So instead, Orba glared at Pashir through his mask, waiting for him to move. He still held the advantage of speed. Of course, it would also be dangerous if the enemy came charging in, but it would also make it more likely to find holes in his defence.

However, Pashir did not move. He held the sword with both hands above his shoulder, not budging an inch.

Tch.

Orba struck the ground with the arch of his feet. His sword flickered. He jumped in a direction different from where he was looking. However, the actions of his feint were unable to perturb Pashir.

The evening wind blew beneath his mask.

The spectators had suddenly returned to silence. The thousands of eyes fixed their attention on these two swordsmen of unfathomable skill. An expectant tension hung in the air, where the outcome might be decided in the next blink of an eye; however, these two did not permit the slightest movement.

Ten seconds, twenty seconds, thirty seconds—time ticked by. A minute passed. Two minutes passed. Everyone held their breaths, but it did not last for long.

"Get him!"

Someone shouted at the five minute mark. "Kill him!" a girl shouted after him.

"Get him! Get him! Get him!"

"Kill! Kill! Kill!"

Everyone present stamped their feet in unison and burst into a clamour of boos. They created the racket in hopes that it would rouse them to movement, but still the two did not move.

Orba was also getting impatient. His sword and armour had never felt so heavy. Standing alone strained his muscles. In the previous clash, Orba had set aside everything for a single strike, but he was uncertain whether he could exert his full strength even on that single strike.

Move.

Orba prayed deeply.

"Don't move," Gowen spoke, while he acted as bodyguard in the grandstands.

"Don't move in a fit of impatience, Orba. Keep that bad habit of yours in check here, please."

Pashir had likely seen through that habit from bearing witness to all of Orba's battles until now. Orba excelled in countering. In terms of physique and power, Orba came out as mediocre amongst the gladiators, and suffered many disadvantages in a direct

confrontation. Therefore, he founded on circling his opponents and luring them in. And when the enemy was pulled into his space, he would deliver a strike aimed at their vitals.

Especially because of this, Gowen lectured him time and time again, “Don’t let that quick temper get ahead of you.”

A quick temper was detrimental to his fighting tactics. Techniques that allowed him to provoke his opponent and gain control of their emotions were essential.

They were what allowed Orba to win throughout his two years as a gladiator. He had devised a number of ways of retreating to lure the enemy in. Sometimes he would initiate, sometimes he would be on the receiving end, and sometimes he would take actions to anger his opponent, all to pull the opponent into his pace. However, they all proved ineffective against Pashir. His firm posture was wholly free of any openings. Because Orba understood this, he could not move.

Gowen himself gritted his teeth in impatience, as time freely passed. And it was not only him. Amidst the tempest of jeers raining down on them, those the least bit curious in knowing the victor of this sword match could feel the heavy tension between Orba and Pashir, and their faces turned rigid as if they were standing there themselves.

Some wiped away the sweat dripping down their chins.

Like a candle just about to go out, the setting sun wringed its last drops of sunlight and covered the arena in a crimson red—

Suddenly, the match progressed into motion.

“Ah,” everyone in the arena let out.

The one to step into the light and aim towards the enemy was Pashir. He appeared to have been the one unable to bear the overly unusual standstill. However,

“Orba, NO!”

Gowen screamed.

Part 2

Within the battle ring of the stadium, which held as much significance as any statue and had weathered years to decades of exposure, Pashir breathed life into his body and made a sharp step forward with his left foot. He applied a thrust that cut through the wind.

The bodies and minds of these two were taxed to their utmost; to Orba, who waited on Pashir, his sudden movement was the greatest feast to be had. Orba, eyes practically screaming with delight, matched his movements so superbly that they seemed almost premeditated.

Orba bent his legs and sprung into the air, avoiding the turning thrust sent his way, and then swung down, executing a series of superior movements. But Pashir had also anticipated this.

He displayed a thrust of full force, but had one foot stepped back, and using that as leverage, pushed away Orba's swing. He slashed diagonally downward, the trajectory curving to take the shape of a perfect circle.

Whoosh.

The ear-splitting swing, along with the cries of the audience, indistinguishable between screams and cheers, sounded across the stadium. Orba staggered backwards, blood gushing out his chest along where his leather armour tore.

To Orba, it was the same as the enemy suddenly having disappeared right before his eyes, following up with an unseen slash sent his way; the way Orba had always done it to others. Attacking with the ferocity of an animal, Pashir gave him no quarter. Two, three strikes. He was barely able to follow the attacks with his eyes and was forced to rely on his body's ingrained reactions. Half his consciousness had been blown away.

The brand is....

Orba was forced further into retreat.

The brand is burning up...

When he circled around Pashir, Orba saw a faint glimmer on his back. Orba saw the brand of a slave seared onto his back burning with flames.

The dying wishes, hearts, and souls of each person Pashir was said to have killed; now, they manifested themselves as flames ready to incinerate Orba to ashes. Or perhaps, the malice wanted Orba's soul to join theirs.

Join us, join us, join us.

Faces appeared on the floating wisps and whispered to him.

You also hate Mephius; you also hate Mephius...

And yet...

And yet, you hold 'doubts'. You 'hesitate'.

Pashir delivered an attack at lightning speed. The strike was too much to take and Orba stumbled backwards.

That's why it's impossible for you. You can't do it. We can't entrust them to you.

So join us inside Pashir.

Pashir can do it; Pashir can accomplish what we want and burn Mephius in a sea of flames.

"Stop."

Orba voiced hoarsely. His body would not listen to him. It wasn't only because of the damage he had incurred. Even now, the grudges of their souls gushed forth not only from Pashir's back, but also from Orba's. They spread and oozed over him, entrenching him. As it were, the hundreds of souls of gladiators Orba had killed were abandoning their host all to become one with the ominous flame lit on Pashir's back.

If you won't do it...

We'll have Pashir do it for us. We'll have Pashir burn Mephius down.

You die as well. Die and join us and become a spark of the flame burning in Pashir's brand. Burn alongside Mephius, Orba.

O-r-b-a.

Having turned the tables, Pashir plunged his sword down without a second's hesitation.

Orba looked up in a haze at the sword about to plunge down him.

Doubts——Hesitation——

Orba had no power in him to resist them. If there had to be a reason, it was because these questions and enticing suggestions all sprouted from within him. Through the tip of Pashir's sword, the thousands of faces belonging to the flame engulfed Orba whole. He felt an unbearable pain, as if his heart was being burned to a crisp.

And,

Just before they could burn him completely and before the sword pierced his chest—

A golden *object* fluttered in front of the two. It was the medal attached to the chain Orba wore over his neck. Freed from the tear in Orba's leather armour and Orba's stumble, it danced in the air.

It burned with a brilliant flame.

It shone vividly, almost as if it were amassing the flames from the bonfires in the evening night.

"Ugh."

Pashir averted his eyes.

And at the same time, the inexplicable restraints that held him disappeared. Orba desperately rolled to the side and evaded the sword plunging down on him.

Vileena!

Reciting that name within himself, he swept Pashir's leg. Pashir fell forward, but immediately regained his footing in the time Orba took to stand up. Their swords collided at a distance both equally away from their faces.

The malice was gone. They should never have been there from the start. If they *had* existed, then they would have originated from Orba's back and not Pashir's.

I won't shoulder them.

Supposing whose life it was, supposing whose soul it was,

Even if the amassed mountains of corpses curse me all night; even if your grudges goad me countlessly, I won't let them influence me, no matter who, what, how...

Sword clashed with sword. Even that single strike proved too much for the wounded Orba to endure. He doubled over.

"Oof."

Orba's iron mask struck Pashir's nose.

The swordsman whose mask was dyed red and Pashir, who likewise had blood dripping down his face, both staggered backwards, and yet also tightened their grip on their swords at the same time.

They approached another to the distance of a blade, and near simultaneously let loose a single swing. Theresia instinctively turned away, and beside her, Vileena dug her nails into her clenched fists, burning this instant into her eyes.

The broken half of a sword was sent spiralling into the air before it pierced into the ground.

There was no sword in Orba's hand. The tip of Pashir's sword shone dully against his neck. He had already used up all his strength, and there was no reason to match Pashir in a confrontation.

That was something Orba was more aware of than anyone. He swung on his right with all his strength and snapped his sword, or may have even deliberately allowed his sword to be broken, and, taking a step to the left, dodged the incoming attack while delivering a right punch to Pashir's jaw. It happened in an instant. After that, Pashir fell on his back, collapsing face up.

Pashir was knocked unconscious and laid still, and Orba's body heaved heavily with laboured breathing.

The victor was illuminated a bright red by the bonfires.

Solon's grand stadium shook.

The surroundings suddenly became dark. Orba was overwhelmed by the terrifying moans sent from the skies by the numerous souls freed from his brand.

"Spare him!"

"Kill him!"

The noise made from these two chants were nearly the same. As if paralyzed with hesitation, Orba did not move.

Then, the arena shook, in a different manner of speaking. The one who stood up and was pointing down her thumbs was the empress, Melissa.

Naturally, that was the signal to 'kill'.

Orba limped towards Pashir, and wresting away the sword in his hands, extended his arm. However, in that instant his body stooped down, and he too fell down and collapsed. Neither winner nor loser existed between these two who lay collapsed on top one another. That, above all else, gave testimony to the breath-taking fight that had unfolded.

"Like this, it seems there is little choice but to wait and see who wakes up first to deliver the final blow," the emperor said. "However, that would leave a poor aftertaste. It is an unfitting end for such splendid battle. The victor is Orba. That will do."

"Princess——Princess."

Theresia shook both of Vileena's shoulders in a huff.

"He won. Orba-sama won."

"Yes...he did..."

Vileena lowered her head, eyes wide open. Her once paled face returned in colour and her neck was drenched with sweat. The spectacle wasn't as horrendous as the young girl thought. It was the depiction of an atrocious and wretched battle, but she had also felt something take hold deep within her and shake her very being.

"That is the medal the princess sent to Orba-sama, is it not? Orba-sama has done the favour of wearing it, and I'm sure that the princess' friendship has bestowed him with victory."

"Uh huh—"

Clasping onto Theresia's hand, Vileena nodded innocently like a little girl. Her racing heart had yet to calm, the gladiator games had seriously done her body more harm than good.

The large crowds of gathered people from within Solon—or rather, within Mephius, chanted the victor's name. As if completely forgetting the long standstill and their outburst of boos, they repeatedly cried out 'Orba' as loud as they could, never tiring of the name.

"A praiseworthy match!"

The emperor stood up and announced. Everyone directed their fervour towards emperor Guhl Mephius in agreement. He raised his hand and waited for the applause to subside.

“It was a splendid battle, one that did not bring shame to the battles of old. The victor who has earned the golden crown, and of course, those who were defeated in these battles as well, serve as the cornerstone of Mephius and will never be forgotten. As we welcome the hundreds of people each year, we mustn’t forget the blood of the thousands who died. In place of the mournful dead, they shall be the living proof of our pride—by the name of the Dragon God, they shall bring glory to our country.”

“Glory...”

“Glory to Mephius!”

The people cheered in chorus.

As he lay collapsed, Orba heard the emperor’s voice as it resound through his back.

“Going through all that trouble...” Pashir groaned lying face down. “It would’ve been fine if you dealt the final blow. You’re too naïve if you think I’ll join the army.”

“What do you mean?”

Orba spoke as if he had just woken, and slowly got up.

“Walking’s the best I can manage. You lay there and sleep for now. It’d be pathetic if the winner was more wounded than the loser.”

“Hmph,” Pashir let out a snort.

Afterwards, the leader of the Gladiator’s Guild and acting representative of the nobles, Fedom, called out.

“Victor Orba, this way please.”

The gates below the grandstands opened, and Orba was brought to the staircase. Fedom beamed with pride. After handing his sword to the Imperial Guards, Orba set foot onto the staircase. He would soon reach the emperor, kneel down, and receive the crown on his head. Gradually, the crowd’s cheers of Orba’s name grew heated. However,

“Stop.”

Guhl Mephius suddenly stopped Orba with his hand. Next to Fedom who displayed a questioning face, he gave a command.

"That mask is an obstacle in the crowning of Clovis' helmet. Take it off."

Orba's instantly stopped moving. Vileena, Ineli, and a considerable number of those seated in the grandstands who knew the masked warrior, Orba, made shocked faces.

"Well?" The emperor said gently. "This is presumptuous. None have hidden their face as Clovis. Take off the mask."

"P-Please wait, your majesty."

"What is it, Fedom?"

"T-That is, the mask he wears is not one made to capture the attention of the masses and adorn his appearance. It has received the curse of a magician to never come off. I-I also did not believe it at first but Orba has never actually been without his mask even under normal circumstances."

"Oh?" The emperor stroked his beard in interest.

Everyone was quiet at the moment. Overhearing the situation, the spectators watched on in awe filled silence.

"We won't know unless we try. You two."

He snapped his fingers, and directed the two imperial guards towards Orba. He was going to pull it off through brute force.

"P-P-Please wait, your majesty."

"What is it? You're being unsightly, Fedom."

Fedom's face paled and he frothed in an utter mess.

"I-It's dangerous. The curse on that mask is likely terrifying. Those who try to take it off or break it regardless of Orba's will die by his hands."

"It will be fine if we hold him down. Or do you mean to say that the curse will, by some invisible hand, reach out and kill me, the emperor?"

"O, o, o—"

'Or possibly' Fedom had started to say, but he found himself unable to speak as he realized he was crossing a dangerous line. The emperor was the descendant of the founding emperor born of man and Dragon God. To even try to say that he would be killed by the likes of a curse would earn him the death penalty from Guhl Mephius.

Vileena Owell had instinctively began to get up from her seat but was forcefully pushed by down by Theresia's hand. Even if she did not know his reasons for doing so, she did understand from seeing Orba's behaviour that he did not want his face exposed bare here. So she was going to lend him a helping hand; however, she had no chance in succeeding. Orba stood frozen, aware of the cold sweat breaking out under his mask and down his back. He shuddered to think of how he would face Pashir afterwards. Naturally, the mask currently held no cursed power. If someone pulled it with all their strength, it would easily come right off.

So they're going with it, huh.

He thought for a quick moment, as he looked at the two imperial guards meekly approaching him. He would knock or kick them down, and then make a run for it. The plan wasn't exactly well thought out, and with his current condition, the chance of succeeding was slim. However, to have his face exposed here would end with his death regardless.

Vileena shoved aside Theresia's hand and began to stand up. She planned on resorting to the 'wager' she had made with emperor the previous day. Orba slightly arched his back, as if he were an animal ready to bite the windpipes off the approaching guards, when,

"Please wait, your majesty."

The figure of a person stood straight up.

Orba looked up to see the person's face, and made a surprised face beneath his mask. The one smiling and bowing towards the emperor was Ineli Mephius.

"Is it not all right that he refuses to take off his mask? He's finally established himself as the masked hero, Orba. The allure of an enigma lies in its carefully concealed mysteries. I dare say nothing will come of it were you to expose him. And it is in good likelihood he may never go masked again."

Ineli's thoughts were welcomed by the nobles with smiles.

"What think you, father?"

“I suppose that also sits well.” Guhl narrowed his eyes at his daughter-in-law’s plea. “Orba the gladiator, you should feel honoured to receive the affection of my daughter. Oh, but bear in mind, I will tolerate no such forthcomings between you two before my presence in the future.”

“Oh father, what are you saying?”

Ineli's face reddened and she looked the other way; the surrounding people laughed once more. Like this, the bashful Ineli triumphed. She was aware Vileena likewise did not want Orba's mask to be taken off. Thus, she was able to revel in a rush of excitement; one very similar to what she might experience were a young girl to be stripped naked in front of her.

Most importantly, the one she dealt with was Orba; the one who failed to take notice of her, and had of all things, danced with Vileena and ruined her plans. She took pleasure in seeing him stand in the face of danger, and was drunk off her perverted satisfaction in having saved this man.

At any rate, Orba kneeled before the emperor as originally set out, and received the crown on his head. The ears of the tiger were somewhat in the way, and the crown sat askew atop his head, but the spectators cheered his name again and clapped their hands.

Vileena breathed a sigh of relief. Then, she felt someone looking at her; surrounded by faces in front of her was Ineli. Her elated smile did a complete turnaround. Vileena was instantly perplexed by the emotion she beheld in that gaze.

Hatred.

A sentiment never before directed towards her. Yes, her father and Theresia had scolded her before; other players had shown her hostility at the airship race; Ryucown had pointed his sword at her at Zaim Fortress and even threatened to kill her.

However, they could not be described as hatred. She felt a chilling sensation together with what felt like a small fire within her chest assaulting her.

Above the gladiator Orba who underwent the coronation, the gazes of these two girls, as if connected by a piece of thread, never parted.

Part 3

Night welcomed the final day of the festival.

The naval review and air parade would soon start. However, Zaat paid little attention to these events and quickly set foot into the empty stadium.

He had come to look at the place where history had changed. Now was a chapter of Mephius rule under the imperials. But tomorrow morning, when he would come to see this empty facility again, it would undergo a complete change.

The change would, of course, not be a visible one. However, the sight after Mephius was freed from the hands of the imperials and taken into their hands would by no means be the same; the view of the distant mountain ridge, of the morning mist creeping along the thin soils, and even the sensations of his clothes as he crossed his arms.

Oh?

Awakening from his stupor, Zaat Quark peered at the figure of the prince, Gil Mephius, inside the arena. Accompanied by several others who appeared to be his Imperial Guards, he walked around here and there.

He seemed to have been frolicking about for the past hour, with the mindset of 'I'm in charge'.

What a simple-minded fool.

Zaat scoffed. That *he* of all people was the first successor to the throne might as well spell the end of Mephius' future. Until now, he had lived in extravagance, wasted as it might be on him, but before long, he would curse the day he was born.

Zaat even considered greeting him in passing, but rescinded the thought.

Although the turmoil of Orba and Pashir's fight had occurred yesterday, there appeared to be nothing hindering the plan's execution. It was a stroke of good fortune that Pashir remained alive. To push the plan, Noue had an instigator infiltrate the sword slaves through Oubary's cooperation. According to a letter from Noue, the instigator had come across Pashir. He was a charismatic and talented man, and most importantly, hated Mephius.

The flames Pashir emitted quickly affected the surrounding people. The small, contained light within the lamp had unwittingly gathered the flames as one and flared up.

As long as he was alive, the sword slaves' revolt would progress smoothly.

Convinced of this, Zaat Quark eagerly awaited the destined moment to come.

—Back to Orba, he had covered every inch of the stadium ring. He now headed towards the grandstands reserved for the imperials and nobles. The majority of the

statesmen attending had their seats assigned beforehand. Of course, this included Prince Gil's seat, as well as Vileena's.

Orba stood in front of his seat, alongside Kain. Kain was an expert with guns. He could handle handguns, rifles, and all sorts of firearms. Orba questioned him.

"Where's the best place to aim *here*? And it has to be a sniping location decided beforehand with a full house."

"Beforehand...hmm, I think it'd be hard to do." Kain narrowed his eyes and looked in all directions. "But if they wanted to take the public's notice, then there's an easy place to take over."

Kain pointed his finger towards a single focus: the watchtowers placed in all directions of the arena.

During the gladiator matches, several guards stood up top and oversaw the goings both in and outside the stadium. Generally, a small airship took station there, and in the case that some problem arose within the stadium, it could be quickly deployed to find the cause.

If all the parts of the sword slaves' rebellion have already been arranged...

Then would the occupation of the watchtowers be included in the plan? Orba contemplated his thoughts, and then fired all sorts of commands at the imperial guards gathered within the stadium.

Of particular importance amongst them, were the airships belonging to his unit. His unit owned twelve airships and Orba planned to deploy all of them.

"Until things start, do not let yourselves be seen. Hide in the surrounding spots near the stadium on standby. A messenger will give the signal. Don't screw up the timing."

Before long, the quick-tempered citizens of Solon gradually showed up, and Zaat also sat himself down on his seat. At this time, Gil and his Imperial Guards had all but disappeared.

In another hour, the nobles would gradually begin to show themselves. Not knowing himself to be one of those pawns, Zaat delighted himself as he watched them continue to assemble.

Two hours from now, when the day reached its zenith, Orba, donning the helmet of Clovis, would appear to lead the two hundred sword slaves. Three Sozos would be transported out in their cages by trolley.

It was the moment that would change history. Shortly after the battle progressed, the slaves of the detention camp would likely make their move. Some of his underlings had slipped in amongst the camp guards. Fires would sprout, smoke would soar, and the escorting palace guards would be forced to head their way, effectively cutting their numbers.

Using that as the signal, the slaves within the stadium would rally into action. They would acquire the aid of like-minded slaves hidden within seating areas, scale the walls, and invite themselves in with the swordsmen. And then the slaves looking after their masters would take this chance to turn a sword or gun against them. And Zaat planned to make his move in the midst of this mayhem.

After that it will depend on what the slaves do, although...

In such a situation, it might be better to view the slaves as allies. He didn't want to poorly diminish the might of his forces, but the complete emancipation of all slaves was an altogether different story. Were the slaves to revolt throughout the country, Mephius would descend even further into chaos. It was not a situation he wished to befall a country he ought to rule over. That was why, even though he called them allies in this situation, he would give them the guillotine to silence them. A man like Pashir was particularly dangerous. He had to be captured first.

It might not be hurt were Princess Vileena to lose her life in the midst of the confusion.

That should return Noue my favour. However.....those insolent Garberans! If they think I'll so easily cooperate with them, then they're in for a disappointment. As long as those worthless imperials aren't around, I can make Mephius rule supreme in the continent.

As he was lost in his thoughts, the stadium continued to fill with people. Except for the emperor and empress, the statesmen had all assembled.

Each and every one of them indulge shamelessly in their own interests like swine. I'll send them off to a place fit for them in chains.

At some point, Zaat had established himself as the sole noble to endow to the poor, and everyone else as dirty and corrupt people of old who had taken over the throne. However, when he saw Simon's face, his thoughts became slightly dishevelled.

He held respect for this man alone, and jumped at the thought of welcoming such an able person as his right-hand man.

Unfortunately, he wasn't a man who would so easily nod his head and say yes.

No, that would make it all the more reason to. Lord Simon is not someone who would leave the country's turmoil alone. It may take some time, but I will see to it that he cooperates with me.

Zaat held the delusion that he had already made the country his and thus failed to notice that amongst the seats of the imperials, Gil Mephius was nowhere to be seen. But supposing even if he had noticed, he was in no disposition to pay it any heed.

On the other end, seated in a separate partition, Vileena worried over the prince's absence.

"Is he still sick?"

Theresia asked from beside her, but she did not know. The emperor, and the other imperials showed no worry at the situation. Having stayed within the Solon palace, she had naturally come to know how the prince was regarded.

That man may also be all alone.

The thought had just come to her that this might have been the cause for his sudden proposal to make Orba participate in the tournament. Did he not broach the topic simply because he wanted to catch their attention?

"Princess, please have this."

Vileena absent-mindedly took the cup of cold tea from the tray of the slave girl. Afterwards, she took notice of the slave girl's face as she proceeded to take her leave. White skin with attractive red lips; her appearance was beautifully stunning. Those able to enter the grandstand reserved for imperials and nobles were limited only to the guards of the Solon garrison, the Imperial Guards, and the slaves who saw to their noble. She was likely one of the latter. Her manner was prompt and her movements supple.

After that, two hours elapsed.

The stadium was packed full and all the nobles were already attended for, but it showed no signs of starting. Zaat knit his brows. How many times had the nobles gazed up the heated sky? The crowd was also beginning to lose their patience and began to get noisy.

"What is the meaning of this?" the emperor suddenly burst out in anger. "Do you plan to shame me at the end of the festival? Begin the match immediately."

In response, an unexpected report had arrived. A stadium official hurriedly rushed towards the emperor and made a bewildered expression.

"The prince had suddenly come and is trying to stop the slaves from leaving. He continues to say 'Wait a little longer, wait a little longer,' and repeats that one phrase."

Everyone exchanged glances. They were half bemused and half dumbstruck.

"What is that fool thinking? Send someone to bring him back."

"Honestly," Melissa sighed as she waved her large fan. "Your majesty, those amongst the envoys from the other countries will surely make light of the prince from this."

"There must be some sort of mistake."

Simon murmured, completely taken aback.

At that time, Gil Mephius—Orba was below the grandstand on the other side of the gate.

He was performing his final check. The timing in today's strategy couldn't be misread even slightly. He exercised discreet caution, and arbitrarily decided to delay the appearance of the sword-slaves, whilst handing down renewed orders to his subordinates.

And as the final phase of his plan, he summoned Kain to a room deep within the camp. Kain would dress himself as Orba and make an appearance as Clovis from here on.

As the star of the festival's climax, they had not forgone any reservations; a plain appearance simply was not allowed. He was fully clad in shining golden armour. Originally, he was meant to wear the golden helmet with its pair of wings that signified the mark of Clovis, but Orba's mask had made it difficult to wear, so instead he strapped a belt with a pair of open folded wings around his waist.

"It's terribly heavy," Kain said, wanting to stick his chin out before even ten minutes had passed. "I won't be able to act like a hero like this."

"Bear with it. Throw your chest out, majestically while you're at it," Orba laughed.

And around this time, Pashir was walking around the detention camp in search of Orba. Granted the role as Clovis' aide, Felipe, he was also required to wear specially tailored clothing and made to change in a separate room. Once that was finished, he immediately left the room. He wanted to go over the plan he would be leading one final time with Orba.

Donning a full mantle tacked with leather shoulder pads, and wearing Felipe's signature bow and quiver over his back, he searched his surroundings. He also passed by the spacious hall where the slaves assembled. Their faces were stiff with tension. They were the faces of valiant men ready to die here today.

"Do you know where Orba is?"

"Now that you mention it, I haven't seen him around."

"The stadium workers called him over. It's probably some special meeting about Clovis' role."

If that was all,

"Then I guess I can wait until he comes back."

Pashir thought. However, he had a nagging feeling. It should already be time to make their appearance, but no one had called on them yet. He had also heard Gil Mephius personally showed up and had a dispute with a stadium official.

He walked all around the camp. But Orba was nowhere to be found. And Mira had also disappeared a while back. He was worried, but thinking it might be about time that they called the gladiators out, he turned back the way he came. Perhaps, he may have unexpectedly missed his destination, because he had just passed his avenue, and came to a complete stop in front of a door. Orba's voice was coming from inside. He was speaking to someone.

"...and we'll able to gain control of the slaves with this. Next will be up to Shique and the rest. When they make their move, pay close attention to Pashir and the others."

What?

Pashir, catching his breath, creeped open the door. And there, he saw Orba and Prince Gil standing side by side. As if he had detected Pashir's presence, Orba quickly looked his way. Their gaze met, and an instant later, Pashir slammed open the door.

"You fucker."

Pashir fired a low, but beastly roar.

"You fucker!"

Twenty minutes later.

The emperor had grown impatient of waiting and angrily stood up from his seat.

"Bring Gil to me. I don't care if you have to tie him up. How long will he continue to act like a child?!"

He threw a fit and was just as well about to go capture Gil himself, that Simon and Fedom had to step in to stop him, when the gates finally opened.

Thoroughly impatient from waiting for the heroes' appearance, the crowd's excitement spiked higher than ever. The emperor lowered himself down onto his seat as he gasped heavy breaths. Cheers rained down as the warriors appeared one after the other in succession from the opened gates.

"Princess, it looks like it's finally beginning."

Theresia beamed. Vileena eagerly leaned forward and tried to look for Orba. However, those eyes immediately stumbled across a peculiar sight.

Orba, who should have been leading them, was not present amongst the gladiators. On the contrary, the one found centre amongst the sword-slaves who came out was—

Gil Mephius.

Not to mention, his hands were tied with a rope behind his back. Pashir stood centre amongst the two hundred slaves moving in procession, holding the rope in his hands.

"Hey, isn't that the prince?"

"What is this?"

"What's the idea of this?"

The people in the stadium spoke uneasily amongst themselves. They believed this was some ploy the attention-seeking prince had thought up to include himself in the gladiator games.

Grr.

Zaat Quark narrowed his eyes. He was of the same mind. This was not in the plan. However, he could smell that they were serious, and as the murmurs continued to grow, he alone came to a general understanding.

By some whim, the prince had gone to check on the slaves and gotten himself captured. Certainly, rather than revolting in the middle of their fight with the dragons, this was more efficient, but Zaat was not too pleased that the previously arranged plan had changed. He clicked his tongue.

That moronic brat. He must have the worst of luck, to stroll along in front of the slaves about to rebel. Well, no matter, as long as this makes things easier.

"Princess, this is..."

Just as their eyes met, Pashir's cry entered her ears.

"Listen up, nobles and imperials of Mephius! We have Mephius' first successor, Gil Mephius—in other words, the future of Mephius in our hands. We are no longer slaves nor will we be forced to kill. Now, open the way for us. We shall become the vanguards of freedom."

"This is absurd!"

Vileena's surroundings suddenly broke into an uproar. The situation had finally dawned on them. This was no ploy. The slaves had taken the successor hostage. This was a rebellion!

"Y-Your majesty, this is a grave matter."

"What should we—"

"Imbeciles! Do not panic. Guards, strengthen the perimeters! Those fools must not be allowed to do as they wish."

The emperor's voice drowned out the crowd's commotion.

Furthermore, several black fumes began to rise from the gates below from the detention camp's direction. The slaves had started a fire. Seeing this, the spectators jumped up from their seats and scrambled to run away. Panic enveloped the crowd

at a tremendous speed. In screams loud enough to warrant covering your ears, rows of people split off to all directions in unrest.

The armed guards hurried to the gates below. On seeing this, Zaat's heart started to beat furiously.

It's begun.

The emperor ordered for the diplomatic envoys to quickly take shelter. The soldiers at the top of the watchtowers boarded the airships and headed towards the seating area for guests. Noue Salzantes, at this time, refused the hands of the soldiers trying to get him to board, and urged the present noblewomen to get on.

"Oh? So they've come."

Noue grinned and directed his gaze across the sky. Others had also noticed.

"Look."

"It's the Garrison's air carriers!"

The Solon Garrison's ships, numbering three, appeared in the sky. Flying centre was the flagship that had just been used in the parade. The remaining two were 24 metre-long high-speed cruisers.

However, with the prince taken hostage, they could not shoot. They could only glare menacingly at the slaves as they circled the stadium.

The opposing slaves—not only Pashir, but also the two hundred others, were surprisingly orderly.

When the airships arrived and the armed palace guards tried to surround them, they would point the sword behind the prince's neck and stop in their tracks. It was almost as if they themselves were part of the country's elite troops forged through long years of training and discipline.

They continued to pointlessly glare at one another. In the meanwhile, Oubary Bilan had secretly disappeared with the envoys.

Having lost his patience, the emperor was about to give some orders, when the flagship suddenly began its descent. Of course, no one had given any such order. Without concealing his surprise, Simon called out vainlessly.

"Wait!"

The other ships were also shaking. The hatch in the back of the flagship opened and airships swarmed out. Each had two soldiers riding them. They were armed with bayonets, but they must have noticed Prince Gil, because they did not directly land on the stadium grounds.

As she looked up at the sky, for an instant, her eyes reflected the colour of flames and her breath was taken away. A trail of flames was coming out from the inner compartment of one of the garrison ships. It resulted from none other than cannon fire from the flagship—and by the time she realized this, another ship had been fired upon.

The side of the ship must have blown up because she saw a scattering trail of vermilion left from the debris, and crew members thrown off from within the ship. The nobles began to scream and cower in fear. And around the same time, the airships from the flagship landed nearby. The soldiers landed one by one and readied their bayonets.

“Princess!”

Theresia firmly gripped Vileena’s hand.

Their faces were concealed by the face mask under their helmet. The group of expressionless soldiers aimed their bayonets at none other than the nobles situated in the grandstand.

Chapter 7: Empty Verdict

Part 1

Over thirty swords and guns took aim at the Mephian statesmen. The nobles turned pale, and even the commanders were left momentarily speechless in the face of the silent, murderous intent directed towards them. The guards responsible for protecting the stadium tried to rush them.

“Don’t move!” A voice from amongst the soldiers brought them to a sudden halt. “Not a single one of you move! Take even one step, and we’ll start shooting one by one!”

With the target of the threat being Mephius' central figures, they were rendered impotent.

"Y-Your majesty..."

The Emporer brushed aside the arm of Empress Melissa, who had tried to restrain him, and stood.

"Identify yourselves!" Guhl Mephius declared, his white beard trembling in rage. "On whose order is this? Do you fools understand who you're pointing your guns at?!"

However, these men who wore helmets over their eyes, did not even flinch at his thunderous roar. He was aware that their equipment came from Mephius, but they bore no crests nor carried any sort of war flag that may have disclosed their origins. It was impossible to tell whose subordinates they were, or if they possibly belonged to a completely separate power that had stolen the equipment from Mephius.

"Tch!"

Commander Rogue Saian's hand gripped the pommel of the sword at his waist, but there was nothing he could do in this situation. The young Romus clung to his leg. He hugged the boy's shoulders, and muttered "I've blundered," repeatedly to himself.

"I will not have you come any closer to the princess, you ruffians!"

"Theresia, stand back."

Her mistress, Vileena, was of course also present in the midst of this insurgence. A cold sweat ran down Vileena's whole body but she kept constant watch in all directions.

Her composure made the nobles' trembling stand out like a sore thumb. Having no means to protect themselves, some had left their seats while some had cowered at the sight of the guns. Others, their bodies frozen in fear, had absentmindedly called on the names of their retainers; hoping that this was nothing more than a bad dream.

*So **this** is what the current Mephius amounts to.*

Only a single person, Zaat Quark, found himself submerged in a torrent of satisfaction, and alternately, one of despondency.

*Unaware that they have been cornered by Noue and Oubary's artifice, I, who have brought them up to where they are now, can, with a single swing of my blade, have them surrender this easily. **This** is the current Mephius.*

Zaat swallowed his laugh with difficulty. The Garrison flagship had been a hurriedly prepared substitute. He had stolen his own troops aboard the ship with the order to seize control of the ship immediately after receiving notice of the rebellion.

The next step would be for him to stand up and step out of the encirclement. At that time, the Emperor and his foolish retainers would finally realize who it was that dared to point his sword at them, and who it was that held their lives in his hands.

And he would declare himself to be the one to lead Mephius.

Of them all, the majority would no doubt choose to be his ally. He had been dissatisfied with the emperor from the beginning and only pretended to be a loyal retainer so that he could one day do this.

They never had the talent to flatter the emperor. They're the same as wild beasts that obey the strong.

Dissenters were to be imprisoned. Of course, the emperor and his family were no exception.

What face would Guhl Mephius make? The mere thought sent Zaat trembling in excitement. This time, he would be the one to stand over that old man who disregarded the thoughts of others.

Zaat, at the peak of his pride, raised his back at long last. He tread that first step towards creating a new country.

But, before he could even finish that step, his hands were forcefully detained.

"What are you—" he began, but was interrupted by the pressing of a dagger's tip against his neck.

To those present, it appeared as though an insurgent had captured Zaat in his attempt to escape.

Ineli and some others near him fumbled out of their seats with cries. Only Vileena's face showed recognition: the one who had stopped Zaat's movements was the beautiful slave girl she had seen before.

Is she also a part of this? Vileena thought.

Zaat also thought the same thing.

"What are you doing?!" He confusedly whispered in a small voice. "Aren't you a slave who also knows about the plan?! The soldiers here, the whole lot of them, are my—"

"That's *exactly* the thing."

The slave's disrespectful tone caused Zaat to go wide-eyed. That voice did not belong to a woman. The force detaining his hands also did not belong to that of a frail woman. And as the slave continued to point his dagger at Zaat, of all persons, he spoke with a clear, resounding voice.

"Gathered ladies and gentlemen, I am sorry to say that there is something I must inform you of in the midst of this crisis; and for that I beg your forgiveness. However, I am convinced that this is something that would tickle the interest of all you ladies and gentlemen. For of the mastermind who staged this rebellion, and who would hold such misgivings—I shall try to provide those answers to you."

"What?!" Zaat shouted, as dumbfounded as everyone else.

Finally, Vileena alone noticed the slave's true identity: the clean cut, a charming gaze, a thin nose bridge and such good looks that it was no surprise that he would be mistaken for a woman-

"It can't be...Shique? Of the prince's imperial guards...?"

The slave dressed as a girl winked at her.

"The imperial guards, you say?!" Rogue Saian spat out. "B-But your actions can be seen as nothing more than supporting the rebellion. Who's the mastermind? Go ahead and say it!"

"Do you not understand? Just now, I was in the middle of presenting that to you fair ladies and fine gentlemen."

Despite having been found out as a man, Shique flashed a bewitching smile. "Ah," Rogue and Simon both responded, dumbstruck.

With the dagger still pressed against Zaat's neck, he used the noble as a shield and turned to face the soldiers.

"It is as you see. Now, what will you do, Mr. Soldiers-who-just-landed-from-the-sky? Why haven't you lot taken a single step for some time now? Do you worry for

Zaat-dono's life? Why is it that amongst His Imperial Majesty and the mass majority of the statesmen you've restrained within your sights, he alone is not among them?"

It was as Shique had mentioned. As the soldiers faces were all covered, their expressions were unreadable, but it was clear from their behaviour that they were trembling.

And at this time, on the other side of the arena below, a riot was occurring.

At roughly the same time as the soldiers had landed from the air carrier, several men had tried to climb the watchtower there. They had, until then, posed as security guards and hidden their real identities. However, as they tried to move according to plan, an obstacle had suddenly barred their path.

It seems a certain someone made the right choice.

Shique muttered, and sent a fleeting glance towards Vileena.

They were likely planning to make use of the confusion, knock down the guards, and snipe down the princess.

But because a certain someone had anticipated it, the 'plan' had been obstructed. This was in fact, done by the imperial guards who disguised themselves as slaves and were deployed into the surrounding area. The snipers, taken by surprise, offered no forms of resistance and were all apprehended.

Taking notice of the signal, Shique broke into a deep smile.

"This makes it a stalemate now, doesn't it?"

"I-I don't know what you mean. Unhand me, slave! How long will the likes of you continue to touch me?! The likes of you are much more suspect to be the mastermind."

"You're contradicting yourself, Zaat-dono. There's no way the likes of a slave could be the mastermind. Why do you think they haven't moved for the longest time now? Come, feel free to shoot the both of us together."

As Shique made a step forward, they nervously took a step back. Everyone within the arena now watched him. The citizens who were previously in a panic came to a halt, and the grand nobles who once lost their wits also shifted their attention towards him, unable to tear their eyes away.

Zaat's mind was now beginning to wander, and just before he lost all hold of himself, he suddenly remembered there was one final hope left and formed a grin.

"Damned fool. You said you were an Imperial Guard, I believe? All the more reason that there's no way you can sit back and let him be killed, can you? That blundering idiot of a crown prince that was caught by the slaves, that is!"

With Prince Gil still captured by the slaves in the arena, it was only natural that this would prevent Shique from moving recklessly.

Everyone's attention turned to the arena, as Zaat chortled.

"If you understand, then unhand me, you filthy mongrel!"

Shique, however, did not waver.

"So he says, my prince," he called out.

At that point, Zaat's eyes came across an unimaginable sight. The rope that should have tightly bound the prince's hands easily slipped off and dropped to his feet. The prince walked forward towards him. None of the slaves tried to stop him.

"You bastard."

The only reaction he saw was that of Pashir tightly clenching his teeth. No, the slaves were sending glares filled with animosity and hatred towards the prince, even if they had not moved a single step.

Gil—Orba, aware of this, felt bitter.

His being taken hostage by the sword slaves had been a ploy from the start. Naturally, the one to order this was Orba himself. Orba had taken the young slave girl of the detention camp loved by all the slaves, Mira, hostage in order to confront them.

His blood had run cold when he had been discovered together with Kain, but even the strong-armed Pashir had been unable to fight back with Mira being used a shield. He had Kain thrust his gun at the young girl, made mention that he had 'heard the entire plan from Orba', and contained the slaves' movements. With their plan exposed by the imperials, their resolution to fight to the death crumbled. The slaves collapsed on their knees in despair.

Only Pashir continued to stare at the prince with a gaze so intense, that if a gaze could kill someone, it wouldn't have been enough for Orba no matter how many

lives he had. And how he shared this sentiment within. Orba pushed down his own feelings in spite of himself whilst seized by this gaze.

This alone would have been enough to put a stop to the slaves' rebellion, but it was not enough to corner the enemy. The plan needed to be drawn out to its second phase at all costs, and thus, he wanted a situation where a rebellion would occur.

However, if the rebellion were to actually take place, the damage would be great. An uprising without a single death easily came to him—one where the vital point required for Gil Mephius to be captured by them.

"You've gone and said it, Zaat," Orba boomed as the arena began to quieten. "How you tried to use them, and how you yourself participated in the uprising. Now it's clear as day that you're the mastermind behind it."

Zaat's face flushed a deep red.

"Is that true, Zaat?"

Simon Rodloom stood up and shot in a pained voice.

"Is it really true that you planned this rebellion?"

Zaat turned his head away. He did not want to see the anger, despair, and pity in Simon's eyes.

Emperor Guhl, Empress Melissa, the Mephian statesmen—everyone wordlessly watched Zaat and the imperial guard who held a sword against him. An uncanny silence befell them. Orba, without any indication of pride at his accomplishment, looked up indifferently. He did not notice the shadow slowly approaching his back.

"Prince!"

The first to perceive this was Vileena.

Orba quickly turned around, and caught sight of a single slave behind him delivering a slash. He quickly twisted his body and narrowly dodged it, but immediately fell on his knees. It was natural that his body did not catch up to his thoughts, considering the damage his body had accumulated in the previous battles.

With a twisted expression, the slave attacked again. From his side, an arm fell down on him like a gale and grabbed him. It was Pashir. Without giving the man any time to struggle, he threw the man down onto the ground with tremendous force and pinned him down.

"You bastard. Are you going to let Mira die?"

Pashir said, his body trembling with anger. And then he made a scowl.

"Of course. You were the one who told me about the plan. Then that also makes you the one who hid the fact you were conspiring with that noble from us. You planned to have us walk to our deaths and make use of that, didn't you?!"

The man looked up at Orba, his eyes on fire, when suddenly he spurt out blood from his mouth. His body convulsed, twice, thrice, and shortly after, he died. He had swallowed poison. The snipers the imperial guards had captured also met the same fate at that moment.

In this instant, like a cornered beast, Zaat made his final act of resistance. As Shique was distracted by the ongoings in the arena, Zaat suddenly pushed him off, pulled the hand of the nearby Ineli, and used her as a shield.

Ineli didn't even have time to scream. With suddenly swift movements as if he had broken out of a trance, he boarded an airship under the directions of his soldiers.

"H-Help!"

Ineli stretched out her hands. But the nearby Baton did nothing but back away with his tail behind his legs. Zaat forced the struggling Ineli into the airship, and continued to soar up into the skies before their eyes.

"Help me!"

Her cries grew distant. "Help me, mother!"

Zaat's soldiers rose up into the sky one after the other. There was an air carrier ahead of them.

Part 2

Orba quickly stood up and immediately assembled his imperial guards. He hurled orders at them. He left a few to survey the slaves, and had the rest chase them by airship. He had prepared an airship unit in case Zaat resisted even with Shique pointing his sword at him.

At this time, Pashir closely observed Orba—or to him, Prince Gil. In such an upset, he handed down orders rapidly in succession without any hesitation. The one who

skilfully threw the sword at him in the previous gladiator game; the one who made Orba sneak in amongst them to gather information…

This brat...

He hated him enough that he wouldn't be satisfied even if he killed him ten times, but on the other hand, he could feel himself hold Gil Mephius in a bit of awe.

The Imperial Guard's airships took off one by one, but the bow of the airships piloted by Zaat's subordinates turned around to intercept those on their tail. Orba's airship unit comprised of those experienced in flying, but their number of allotted ships were few, nor could they be said to have gone through official training. They were blocked by a handful of ships and were unable to chase the ship steered under Zaat's poor handling.

"Aren't there any other ships?!"

Orba turned left and right, asking a soldier he grabbed, but there were no airships here at the arena, as they weren't handy to have around. Of course, a new garrison of dragonstone ships were being readied at this moment, but if Zaat reached the flagship before they rescued Ineli, they would not be able to lay a hand on Zaat

Damn you Zaat, for uselessly resisting.

Orba wanted to capture Zaat alive by all means possible. Then he could make Zaat spill out the names of all the people involved in the plan.

"Damnit!"

Then, an airship landed to a stop beside Orba just as he cried out. Someone had managed to get one. "Good," Orba said, a smile spreading across his face, and when he looked over, he went wide-eyed for an instant.

"Aren't you going?"

It was Vileena.

She heard the prince's cry, and personally strapped herself onto an airship—used to move the envoys to safety—that had just come back to board the nobles. Turning a deaf ear to any attempts to stop her, she turned on the ether engine and made haste to Orba.

She hovered the airship just above the ground, and quickly bundled her hair.

Orba was about to be begin to say something, but was quickly urged on by her gaze and nodded back.

"Of course."

This was no time to argue.

Orba strapped himself in the back, and Vileena took off without a second's delay. The hum of the ether engine beat like the chattering of teeth and the ship, taking on the appearance of a wyvern, rose, gradually gaining speed.

"Did you make…"

"Huh?"

"Did you make Orba participate in the tournament for this?"

For an instant, Orba was unable to hide his unease at having his own name brought up.

"Y-Yeah."

"Why did you not tell me this earlier? You must have been laughing at me throw my childish tantrum in a fit."

"O-Of course I wasn't."

"Then why?...Do you not believe you can confide in me as your future wife yet? Do you still suspect me to be a Garberan assassin?"

Women.

Why was it that even at times like these that they could take priority over their own circumstances? Even as the roar of the wind whooshed past them and the airships they passed continued to open fire. Then, an enemy ship noticed them and began to descend.

"More importantly, they're coming!"

"I know that. I'd prefer if you didn't look down on me."

Vileena huffed, and swerved the ship left with all her strength. Orba, who felt as if he was going to fall off, hurriedly grabbed the edge of the cockpit. The sound of gunfire directly below the ship whizzed past them.

"I may have forgotten to mention it," Vileena said calmly as her eyes were fixed to the front, "but as a word of caution, this will *not* be a smooth ride."

This bitch.

Orba was instinctively about to shower her in insults from his childhood days, but held himself back. Instead, he seized the gun mounted on the rear of the ship and fired off a warning shot at the ship that just flew past them and was beginning to turn around. The orange trail of the bullet bent like a whip below him.

"Wait. Could you not shoot please? It gets in the way of flying."

"But…"

"The air is my domain."

Even as she said this, Vileena continued to splendidly dodged the return fire. While Orba was assaulted countlessly by a chilling sensation, Vileena slipped past the enemy ships trying to spread out into a defensive formation and caught up right behind the air ship Zaat piloted.

Impressive.

Orba was amazed at the princess' manoeuvring skills. She would make a promising airship instructor for the Imperial Guards.

The garrison flagship came closer, blocking the sunlight and darkening the view in front of him. And with little pause, it lined up with Zaat's ship and opened its hatch, where Zaat jumped in.

Vileena pedalled the airship to a crawl. Orba, not stopping, jumped down and tried to run over to Zaat.

"Don't come any closer!"

Zaat had also jumped down and landed with a roll while holding Ineli by the shoulders, but he did not forget to point his gun at her forehead.

There were no signs of anyone in the hangar. The majority of the soldiers had been deployed outside and the rest were likely steering the flagship.

"B-Brother…"

Using the fiercely trembling young girl as a shield, Zaat stood up once more.

"Who would've thought it would be the prince. I would never have expected to be caught red-handed by *you*." Those eyes tore up in hatred.

"The life granted unto by His Majesty, is it? Or could it possibly be from Lord Simon? That man speaks his true mind too much. Be that as it may, I would never have imagined you would see even up to the slave's rebellion—"

"Enough of this, Zaat. There's no place left for you to run. If you're also a noble, accept defeat like a man and hand over Ineli."

"Ha!" Zaat snorted. "Well aren't you the hero, prince. I bet you'd love to have this written down in history. But unfortunately for you, that won't happen. As if I would let even a bit of your imperial history to remain. For the dawn celebrating me as Mephius' 'founding' king, first, I will have to burn that tainted history to pieces."

"That's great."

"Silence!"

Zaat further pressed the gun against Ineli, who was almost like an infant about to burst into tears.

A strong wind blew in from the opened hatch. In the midst of the clothes and hair flapping noisily,

"It will not end like this. The stagnation you self-proclaiming imperials created will ruin you from within. And at that time...I *will* return. To here, to these lands of Mephius!"

Saying this, Zaat fired a shot to Orba's side. It was to restrain Vileena, who had begun to stealthily circle the afloat airship to behind Zaat's back. Even the princess dropped down and shrieked. Within that moment, Orba made a dash for Zaat.

Drawing out the sword from his back, he tried to lunge at Zaat's arm. Zaat never expected the prince to come charging at him with a weapon in one hand, and hurriedly switched targets. But it was already too late. In that quick moment he was already within thrusting range.

A gunshot sounded. This time, luck was on Zaat's side. Orba's injuries from his battles with Gash and Pashir affected him more than he expected, and when he was a mere distance away, he toppled over from the wind.

"Guh!"

Orba fell over backwards with a groan. The bullet shot through his chest.

"Brother…!"

"Prince!"

The cries of these two girls overlapped. Zaat gave a low, maniacal laugh while his brows glistened with sweat.

"With this…with this, there's no turning back."

Orba lay collapsed and unmoving. "Prince!" the princess called out from the airship once more. Zaat turned his gun to the princess who began to climb off her airship. Her platinum hair swayed as she glared at the rebel.

"You…!"

"This is what he gets for acting heroic. He should have just stayed the usual prince and quietly trembled in the corner of the stands."

"And you were the one driven to a corner by that prince's hand, were you not? Surrender yourself, Zaat. Then you'll only have been a man who strayed off his path."

"It is because I want to return Mephius back to man's hand that I have performed this deed. Do you not understand that, little girl?"

"Pitiful man," Vileena murmured, "blinded by your own words. A country cannot be led by a single person. You are a pitiful man who does not pay heed to the times, and continues to chase after a delusion without knowing when to give up, just like that pitiable Ryucown."

Vileena threw words of ridicule at him, thinking it might make him falter even a little. However, fortune still smiled on Zaat. Seeing the Imperial Guards were more or less held in check, a ship from one of Zaat's subordinates surfaced her way. Even then, she did not give up.

"First and foremost, where will you escape to? There are no powers willing to hide you, who turned against your master."

"Oh, then what do you think of Garbera?" Zaat sneered, suddenly enjoying this conversation in its entirety. "As righteous knights, won't they gladly welcome me, who bore my fangs against the nefarious Mephius?"

"What foolishness. As long as I am here, Garbera and Mephius will be tied together. Do you think you can sever that bond so easily?"

"Lass, you speak as if you know everything. But you understand nothing. It was none other than Garbera that involved you, down to your very life, in this plan."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I wonder...I've already spoken too much. There will be plenty of time from now on. Why don't I slowly explain it to you during our journey in the sky?"

The hatch opened and an airship came in. Two soldiers jumped down and approached her way. Vileena ground her teeth. The prince was in the corner of her view. The prince, collapsed face-up, was still unmoving. *It can't be,* she thought. The prince criticised and sneered at by many. Truthfully, Vileena was also annoyed at his weak attitude. She had also gotten angry at him. But he was a prince who sometimes took bold incentives with ingenuity that riled his foes. Everyday, he showed a different face, where even if she tried to understand him, she would suddenly notice the day gone by and wonder if maybe today, she would be able to come to an understanding of him.

That that prince would meet his end here...

And even as they glared at one another, Zaat called out to the soldiers holding their bayonets.

We will take the women with us. Move away the prince's corpse. Be sure to properly dispose of it. It's better to make it look like we have more hostages.

The soldiers stepped over Gil's body and grabbed Ineli away from Zaat. At that time, Ineli put up a weak struggle.

"M-Me? What will happen to me? What will you do with me?"

"You? Hmm...we'll have you act as a shield against Mephius' pursuers," Zaat gave a smirk. "And then after that...when I've completed my conquest, I suppose I'll have you put on the guillotine to represent the imperials. The people will rejoice and will surely jeer and throw stones at you as you are handed your punishment."

"I...I don't believe this. I've done nothing wrong!"

Zaat elatedly suppressed a laugh.

"Even you should be aware of the everyday troubles the people are put through. You should know of the anguish his retainers are put through, knowing the very foundation of the country might change tomorrow on the emperor's single whim," he said in a sing-song tune. There was no doubt Zaat Quark thought himself an envoy of justice at this time, who would be told throughout in many historic records. Why was it that those eyes that should have been unable to capture the citizen's suffering, were now able to? He, at this point in time, held the impression that he had stood up for the people.

"Hiii!"

The soldier who gripped Ineli's shoulder suddenly gave a jolted scream.

Someone had grabbed him from behind. As the soldier violently swung around his arm in a panic, that someone stole the bayonet from him, and following a whack on the head with the handle, kicked the soldier aside.

"It can't be!"

Zaat stumbled backwards. Before his eyes opposite the collapsed soldier, he beheld a pale-faced apparition.

"Impossible! T-The bullet...I'm sure the bullet definitely hit you…"

Orba, while huffing for air, narrowly dodged a thrust from an incoming soldier and slashed him in the stomach. The soldier silently fell and this time, Orba was the one to step over his body.

With each step he took, pain seared throughout his upper body. The bullet had definitely hit him. That impact, even now, struck through his entire body like a heavy brick. Not paying any mind to Ineli, who was now practically crawling her way to escape, Zaat gave a loud mouthed scream.

"D-Don't come any closer!" he shouted, as if he were possessed by a ghost.

He took aim with his gun again. Orba slapped it away with his right hand.

"What was that? What did you just say, when you used the slaves, of how they staked their lives, and then trampled all over them? As if you could even understand."

Orba spouted hoarsely, and chopped Zaat on the temple with his left hand.

His knees lost all power. Orba laid his unconscious body onto the floor. At that time,

"Zaat-sama!"

He saw another man at the stairs leading up from the hangar. The man's name and face were unfamiliar to Orba, but he was an officer of the Blue Archery Division, Gary Lynwood.

It was unfortunate for them both that, at this time, Gary saw Zaat collapse as a sign of him being dead. He gave in to his anger and shot his gun. A bullet bounced off near Orba's feet.

Orba fired back. At that time, he was assaulted by a furious vertigo. His reactions were all the more slowed by his injuries.

Bang, bang, bang! Three shots were fired and his body convulsed. It wasn't Orba's though, but the body of Zaat, which he quickly used as a shield.

"Tch."

Orba spat out some blood and fired a shot over Zaat's shoulders. It struck Gary in the chest and threw him against the wall where he fell down sideways, leaving a trail of blood.

Like this, the struggle where a single breath sent his whole body running in a fever came to a close.

"Shit!"

Zaat's body slid out of his arm. Orba himself fell on his knees and furiously arched his back. Sweat raced down his face and continued to drip onto the hangar floor.

Without a doubt, Zaat had breathed his last. Orba bit into his lips.

Now the trail leading to Oubary's involvement is gone.

He could also try to capture Zaat's subordinates, but the chances they knew the full contents of the plan were slim.

The ferocious emotions that held him had, after the battle concluded, been overtaken by a rush of forlorn anguish.

What was I fighting for then? To protect the prince's status? To protect those stinkin' Mephian nobles?

As he was about to forget himself and kick at Zaat's corpse,

"Prince Gil."

A girl was running to him as if she were trying to fly.

Vileena knit her brows and had opened her faintly moist lips. Under the heavy winds generated across the hatch, her hair had come undone and swayed behind her. When Orba saw her, a mysterious feeling welled within him.

I see...

It came so suddenly and filled the bottomless emptiness within him, if even a little.

If there had to be one, if there had to be one reason, then my objective was...

"Are you injured? Let me see where you were shot. No, actually, don't force yourself to do the impossible and lay down there..."

"I'm fine."

"But…"

And it was at this time that Orba was overcome with exhaustion. He reached over the single point burning under his chest and took out a shining, golden medal. The bullet was driven into the upper part of that medal. It was crumbled, but still seemed to give off heat. Vileena gasped.

"Prince?" Vileena asked dubiously.

"Why is the prince carrying this?"

Orba was momentarily at a loss for words. Only the sound of Ineli wailing resounded within the hangar.

Afterwards, Orba strapped himself onto an airship piloted by a soldier. Ineli got on Vileena's ship. Both ships flew off from the flagship.

Below them, the fight continued to unfold. There, Orba announced from above of Zaat's death and Ineli's rescue. The movements of Zaat's soldiers quickly grew less coordinated. Victory was already more or less decided in the arena. They knew their final acts of resistance to be vain and were nothing more than a pointless struggle.

The flagship captured by Zaat's soldiers had also been seized by the garrisons reformed fleet.

Like this, the final day of the founding festival had passed and the series of revolts were brought to an end.

And Orba was—

—well, he was remembering the excruciating pain he suffered throughout his whole body, particularly on his right shoulder.

Although the medal had stopped the bullet, the impact had likely fractured his collarbone. Nonetheless, he could not afford to rest his body just yet. There was still the portion of cleaning up.

Orba saw to Vileena and the others being dropped off at a safe place and had his ship head towards the arena once more.

Part 3

Even though it was before noon, the corridors of the Main Palace were sombre.

Clouds had overcast it.

Orba, accompanied by Shique and Gowen, strut down the hall.

Not even seven days had passed since the festival's final day. Orba wore a cast around his arm, but walked with his chest held high.

The maids and chamberlains he passed by stopped their feet and sent a bow his way. Those eyes held a respect never seen until now towards the prince who stemmed the tide of Zaat Quark's rebellion.

Fame of how continuing on after his first campaign, he had exposed his hidden wits, spread within the country. But claims labelling him as an eccentric also surfaced.

This had come from Gil's choice of action immediately after he rescued Ineli from Zaat's ship.

He came back to the arena and announced to the slaves there that he would 'have them work under him'.

They may have been roused by and used by Zaat, but it was hard to imagine anything except capital punishment against the slaves who plotted a rebellion. That would be to become slaves in the battlefield, or so Gil said:

"One to two hundred of our own troops revolted against Mephius. With a firm leash, they will surely become heroes that bring about victory for Mephius."

"What do you think, Colyne?"

The emperor asked his retainer, unable to hide his surprise at how his son managed to put a stop to the chain of disturbances.

It was the same for Colyne Isphan. However, he was a natural at reading his lord's intentions, and this time as well, he replied in courtesy.

".....The prince has ability. I believe it is best to leave things to him."

With that single conversation, emperor Guhl Mephius resolved his mind. As Gil's reward, he would acknowledge the claim.

However, it was only this time that Guhl made a show of generosity as emperor. Since what happened with Zaat, the emperor began to act more and more self-righteous. As if he had forgotten Kaiser's opposition towards the relocation of the Dragon Shrine, he now raised the issue of the establishment of the shrine, and in little to no time at all, began its construction. As the emperor's advisors, it was decided the group of elders would dwell within the shrine, and the emperor, instead making use of Zaat's rebellion, had strengthened his political powers.

That makes me the one who helped him accomplish that, Orba thought.

Besides the stopping of Zaat's rebellion, Orba fought a battle where he got little of what he wanted. Even then, the small satisfying portion he had been granted was the plummeting of Oubary Bilan's assessment. Knowing of the plan, Oubary likely disappeared off the face of the rebellion and planned to assist the winning side, whether it be the emperor or Zaat, playing the role of a patriotic hero. However, based on the results, he was criticized for having 'left behind the emperor and be the only one to flee ahead of them'.

A faint smile creviced across Orba's mouth, when opposite his way came along Noue Salzantes. Noue greeted him with a smile. He remained in Solon even after the festival had ended in order to continue discussion of the transfer of Apta territory, but that too would see its end today.

"Lord Noue."

Orba nonchalantly called this man, who was about to pass by without incident, to a stop.

"Yes?" he turned around.

"It's great above all that the princess is safe."

"Pardon?"

Noue momentarily drew a blank. Then affirming with a nod, "Yes, it is."

"There certainly was a fear of danger befalling the princess in that disturbance. Your highness the crown prince's heroic efforts have also rescued us Garberan retainers—"

"Next time," Orba pointed at his own head, "they might aim for *me*."

And he continued to walk along accompanied by Shique and Gowen without turning back.

Noue stared at his back incredulously. Those words seemed to hint that the princess had not been 'caught up in the disturbance', but that the enemy surely aimed for her life. And to purposely convey that to Noue…

His aim was clear.

Noue's smiling facade, which usually never came off, crumbled.

Gil Mephius.

Without realizing it, he wiped the sweat off his brows. Of course, he held both anger and surprise at how Gil trampled over his plans. However, it was at this moment that he experienced a shiver in its truest sense.

What an unfathomable man. Like this, it would've been better if I had only observed him.

As of this moment, Noue Salzantes was unable to see through Gil. While it was a fact that Gil had brought about Ryucown's death, when Noue caught a glimpse of him, he had concluded that he wasn't much of a threat and neglected to collect his 'fragments'.

My eyes have become clouded. The only one to fear in Mephius is that man alone.

With a flick of his hair, Noue turned around once more.

Interesting. Who would have thought in the barbaric country that is Mephius, there existed a man the same type as me. How fearsome, and yet interesting.

Wasn't the last time he held these feelings when he came across Ryucown's bedazzling future? As he thought this, a chuckle continued to escape his pallid face.

"Quickly now, princess. Please make haste. Lord Noue is departing."

"Wait. Just a little longer."

Vileena was, at this time, shut away in her room sitting in front of a most unusual desk. She was writing up letters to be delivered to the people of her hometown. She would entrust them to Noue, who was returning to his own country.

She had been at this every night recently. But she was a woman of poor penmanship and to make matters worse…

"Now, now, you're acting as if you've been separated from Garbera for tens of years. You keep writing more and more!"

It was as Theresia remarked. What she was trying to write was no insignificant quantity. She could not be satisfied with what she had.

Because she was the Vileena with the bad habit of crumbling away any writing slips whenever she wrote letters, the room would easily become a mess of scrapped paper in a moment of undue vigilance. Naturally, it fell on Theresia to gather them.

"How about you dedicate some of that passion to writing a love letter to the prince?"

Naturally, Vileena chose to disregard this and continued to obsess over how she wanted to tell her beloved grandfather of this, and how she wanted to write to him about that.

Speaking of the prince...

Her pen suddenly stopped.

It was about the medal. Afterwards, when she questioned Prince Gil about it,

"I...borrowed it from Orba."

He answered, somewhat stumbling.

"It...looked like a nice charm. So I borrowed it while I brought Zaat's rebellion to a stop. It's become like this...but don't worry, I'll fix it somehow. It should be fine. Probably."

Vileena was now surely writing down her impression of Prince Gil.

> *He's somewhat like a child.*

She jotted down. Continuing on,

> *But he's not someone I can let my guard down around.*
> *Between me and the prince, who will control Mephius? He will make a fine competitor.*

Vileena smiled as she finished writing.

"So you've come."

"I have, father."

Orba joined his feet in salute, and behind him, Gowen and Shique made a bow and took their leave.

The emperor had personally summoned him.

He was in one of the four towers surrounding the Main Palace. From the top floor, the emperor surveyed over the gardens and dragon huts within the palace. Two medium-sized Gor dragons engaged against one another as part of the training drills

and in a separate location, a dragon rider mounted on the small-sized Tengo dragon ran around in laps.

Orba had some ideas why the emperor had summoned him. And Fedom also wasn't without his complaints.

"Really…...the nerve of you!"

Fedom Aulin was at his wit's end. The prince's rise to fame made good progress for Fedom, but he could not forgive him for not allowing him to partake in it.

"It would've done you no harm to put in a single good word for me. Everything could've gone better. The worst was how you made those slaves work under you on your own accord. His majesty, Guhl, may have welcomed it with open arms, but he will surely scold you after. You'd better not talk out of your place! Wait, and *only* wait until his majesty's anger subsides."

But even Orba didn't dare plan to defy the emperor here. He stared at the emperor's back, waiting for scoldings to be hurled his way. Some time passed.

In this way, he saw no change in what could only be seen as an old man's back. He was of course, swordless and carried no gun, but Orba still held qualms of how his life might be taken now.

"Do you know of Ax Bazgan?"

Having been asked so suddenly, Orba could only reply with a "Yes."

To the west of Mephius was a nation consisting of several spread out fortresses. It once served under the imperial court but was split off following insurrection after insurrection, and presently competed with Mephius for power. Belonging to that nation, was Mephius' longtime enemy, Ax Bazgan.

The Bazgan House hailed from a family line serving Mephius, but roughly two hundred years ago they had arbitrarily cut down the Zerdians spread across the western lands by their own sword in their bid for dominion. Orba had yet to hear of what happened after, but that aside, they had since then held an antagonistic relation with the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius.

Ax Bazgan had invaded Mephius territory three times and each time, Mephius had driven him back, but Ax was a keen and opportunistic man and three times, Mephius failed to take his head.

Twelve years ago, Guhl Mephius dispatched an army to the west after his head. However, Ax readily abandoned his own fortress and with the help of a relative, safely escaped to a different city-state. The army occupied the fortress, but the small city-state which should have been in civil war on end was strangely cooperative with the enemy outsiders and launched an attack simultaneously alongside three forces.

Amongst them was, of course, Ax, and he soon re-established the terrain as his own after the Mephius army retreated without breaking a sweat. After that, Mephius began its ten year war with Garbera and the western fortresses sparked hostility between them once more.

That Ax Bazgan's movements had lately been suspicious.

Apta fortress was in the southwestern portion of Mephius. The fortress where his only brother, Roan, had been drafted and Oubary had taken command of would soon be returned back to Mephius. They had received news that Ax was preparing to mount an attack aiming for that chance.

"Rumours of Zaat's rebellion have spread to the surrounding countries. At any rate, the number of countries that have sent envoys number many. It is impossible to stem the flow of information. Ax aside, it would not be strange for someone to attack Mephius on seeing its political unrest."

"No, it wouldn't, father."

"There may be those spurred on by Zaat and willing to defy me again. I cannot allot a sizable army for Apta. That, Gil, is where you shall go."

"....."

Orba had no words to express himself. His forces comprised of the sixty-three members of the Imperial Guard and the two hundred and six slaves from the rebellion that now worked under him. There, Oubary's Black Armoured Division and Odyne's Golden Axe Division would each loan out fifty soldiers to assist in safeguarding Apta.

"One month shall suffice," Guhl said, his back still turned the other way. "Stall Ax's troops at Apta for that time. Once the month is up, I will send reinforcements if there are no movements from Ende or the anti-imperial factions. The dawn of that day shall celebrate your marriage and official appointment as charge of Apta."

Orba was silent as he bowed down his head.

Is he testing his own son?

Although no sound escaped him, tens of thousands of words floated across his mind.

Of the troops given to the prince, three fifths had only recently rose against the country in revolt and it was questionable whether or not he could control them. If Ax really attacked, it was questionable that he could even last three days, let alone a month.

It was a poor play on behalf of the emperor. If things went badly, he would lose the territory finally returned to him and possibly even his successor.

However, Orba also made no oversight in his amassing of information. The possibility that war might break out between Ende and Garbera had become the talk of the statesmen. The emperor could only be thinking of using the excuse of Ax's attack from the west as an excuse not to send reinforcements to maintain their relation with Ende.

So he plans to hold out as long as possible to see which side is stronger?

Guhl was cautious. If he simply sided with Garbera, there was a possibility Ende's ally from the east, Arion, would come out. Until now, Arion had expended the majority of its forces towards its eastern expedition, and having mostly accomplished this feat, it would likely set its eye on the centre of the continent. Furthermore, knowing of Mephius' political turmoil at this time, the powerful Arion might well aim the brunt of its force at the Solon capital.

But if Mephius allies with Ende, what will happen to Vileena? How will this affect Gil Mephius' standing?

And while this wasn't yet confirmed, one other subject had become the topic of gossip within the palace.

A team of Imperial Court doctors had been seen frequenting the women's chambers. Rumours spread that this might signify Melissa conceiving a child.

And without taking notice of the emotions running through Orba's mind, the emperor spoke further.

"I'm afraid the princess will have to wait longer. You should also take Princess Vileena with you. Apta will eventually be your own castle. The princess should also get used to living there."

"We shall celebrate your marriage after a month," Guhl mumbled on.

While he held his head in a bow, he felt a rage simmer through his chest. Flowing within the flood running through his body, the most primitive of instincts—his desire to do battle—had been lit.

I get it now. The threat isn't only limited to Ax and the sword-slaves.

A battle with a slim chance of victory.

More specifically, even *more* battles.

What Orba could expect was, in the end, a continuing battle.

In that case—

"I understand, father."

Orba joined his feet in salute.

I'll do it.

Compared to when he swore his revenge, Orba now had standing; even if that standing meant his life would constantly be aimed for.

Compared to when he swore his revenge, Orba now had his own troops; even if the flames of turmoil still stirred within those troops.

Compared to when he swore his revenge—.

I'll do it. I'll set foot back here, to Solon, in triumph.

The Apta that was near his hometown would make it easy to get information on his brother and mother. However, whether Orba was aware of it or not at the time, the times he clashed swords with Ryucown and Zaat had changed his views towards battle.

The harder the battles and the bigger his enemies were, the more Orba's feelings lit up like a flame to match them.

Orba's pair of eyes and entire body now radiated the ferocity of a tiger.